Dastan-ए South Asia

داستانِ جنوبی ایشیا

ISSUE 01

“We Regret To Inform You....”

HGC

HGC
HIDDEN GEM COLLECTIVE

Dastan-ए South Asia Issue 1
"WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU...."

ISBN: 978-81-962797-7-6
June 01, 2026

Contributors : Aman Kumar Bavariya, Amit Saroha, Ankit Banerjee, Anshika Chaudhary, Chandan Singh, Dr. Pratishtha Mukherjee, Gaurav Kumar, Hrishikesh Sarma, Lata Joshi, Mrinal Das, Om Kumar, Prasoon Chandra Poddar, Rahul Wahi, Rajnesh Kumar, Sahiba, Sahil Kumar, Saloni Tamsetwar, Yash Mishra, Yash Vyas, Zala Siddique

Published by DPAAS
Designed & Supported by Hidden Gem Collective
Edited & Curated by Davangi Pathak

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Cover Image:
Artist: Anshika Chaudhary
Title of the work: Untitled
Year: 2025

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Contributors

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Yash Mishra (b. 1991, Hyderabad) is a writer, researcher and filmmaker. Yash holds a Bachelor of Science in Mass Comm, Advert and Journalism (2013) from Asian School of Media Studies, Noida and Master of Arts in History & Heritage Management (2019) from Annamalai University. Yash has recently earned Master of Arts in History from Indira Gandhi National Open University (2026). His practice explore intersections of cinema & history and have been actively involved in Southern Cinema.

Yash Vyas is a visual artist based in Gujarat, India. He completed his Bachelor of Visual Arts degree in 2019 and received his Master of Visual Arts degree in Sculpture in 2021 from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.

Zala Siddique is a visual artist based in Quetta, Pakistan. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 2019 from BUITEMS Takatu Campus and received her Master's degree in Art Education in 2023 from Beaconhouse National University.

Foreword

"We Regret to Inform You..." is a publication emerging from the open call initiated by Hidden Gem Collective, inviting artists, writers, researchers, and practitioners to respond to the experiences of rejection embedded within creative and institutional spaces. The publication brings together practices, proposals, and narratives that have, at various moments, been dismissed, overlooked, misunderstood, or deemed unsuitable within prevailing systems of validation.

The open call explored two interconnected concerns: First, practices, subjects, and proposals that have been rejected by institutions and organizations — often because they are perceived as misfits, blasphemous, difficult to categorize, or incompatible with dominant contemporary discourse. Second, themes and lived realities that exist deeply within everyday life and culture, yet continue to be ignored, erased, or inadequately represented because they fall outside accepted frameworks of visibility and understanding.

At its core, this publication asks: Who decides what is worthy of being seen, archived, funded, or remembered? More importantly, what happens to the practices and voices that continue to exist outside these structures of approval? The contributors gathered here respond to rejection not as an endpoint, but as a condition that shapes artistic inquiry, resilience, and alternative ways of seeing. Across painting, sculpture, installation, writing, fashion, and research, the publication becomes a collective archive of practices that resist disappearance. Anshika Chaudhary reflects upon emotional and psychological states often neglected within the accelerated rhythms of contemporary life, foregrounding the necessity of pause, introspection, and vulnerability. Aman Kumar Bavariya transforms discarded fabrics and waste materials into tactile painterly surfaces, reclaiming materials whose utility has been exhausted and repositioning them within contemporary artistic discourse.

Amit Saroha employs burning as a process of mark-making, using scorched surfaces to explore survival, erosion, and regeneration through a gesture conventionally associated with damage and destruction. Hrishikesh Sarma revisits the overlooked rhythms of rural life and nature through woodcut printmaking, engaging with quiet forms of coexistence and ecological sensitivity. Lata Joshi challenges rigid structures of rationality and socially conditioned thinking, embracing intuitive and emotional forms of understanding shaped through personal transformation. Mrinal Das documents disappearing agrarian histories, landscapes, and collective memories of Mojoli Island, preserving cultural narratives threatened by ecological and social change. Om Kumar interrogates conventional notions of masculinity by foregrounding the emotional and psychological burdens carried by men beyond socially accepted roles of strength and labour. Prasoon Chandra Poddar reclaims forgotten cinema poster traditions and electronic waste, exploring contradictions between memory, obsolescence, consumerism, and cultural transformation.

Rahul Wahi transforms the clinical archive of chronic illness into a visual language of resilience, visibility, and selfhood, confronting the realities of living with Thalassemia Major. Ankit Banerjee, through the essay Rehumanising the Boy, questions patriarchal constructions of masculinity and advocates for the normalization of emotional and unconventional male identities often dismissed within society. Rajnesh Kumar explores fractured and performative identities, examining the hidden selves individuals construct out of fear of social rejection and exclusion.

Sahil Kumar reflects on rejection itself as a formative threshold within artistic practice, exploring how institutional refusals reshape self-perception, endurance, and processes of healing. Saloni Tamsetwar, through Rangeen Mukti, examines how cultural codes of mourning impose silence and restraint upon women, while reclaiming colour as a subtle act of resistance and liberation. Yash Vyas, in The Lottery Ticket, reflects on artistic aspiration and invisibility within the culture of applications, submissions, and open calls, where persistence continues despite repeated silence and refusal. Chandan Singh's paintings do not romanticize rural life; instead, they observe, criticise and reject it. They bear witness to its tragedies and celebrations, its disappointments and quiet strength—inviting viewers to reflect on their own histories, displacements, and connections to land and belonging.

Zala Siddique critiques political nepotism and systems of governance through satirical caricature sculptures that expose self-interest, exclusion, and performative authority. Yash Mishra, through The Mystic Lens: Silsilah on Screen, questions contemporary visual appropriations of Sufi traditions and the distancing of spiritual practices from their original philosophical contexts. Dr. Pratishtha Mukherjee revisits the iconography of the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā in Carved Emotions: Understanding the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā in Art, re-examining feminine archetypes often neglected within contemporary scholarship. Gaurav Kumar, in Beyond Sensation: Rethinking the Essence of Erotic Art in India, reconsiders eroticism within Indian art history, engaging with subjects frequently reduced to controversy and taboo. Sahiba explores marble inlay as a living craft tradition, examining how contemporary generations of artisans continue to negotiate preservation, labour, and changing cultural economies.

Together, these contributions reveal rejection not merely as exclusion, but as a generative space — one that produces alternative archives, resistant imaginations, and new forms of visibility. "We Regret to Inform You..." ultimately becomes both a reflection on institutional structures and a celebration of practices that continue to persist beyond approval, categorization, and acceptance.

- Davangi Pathak
  Anthropologist, Curator & Visual Culture Practitioner

Aman Kumar Bavariya

Aman's practice primarily engages with painting and experimental weaving, creating works that blur the boundaries between fine art and textile traditions.

Working mainly with acrylic on canvas, Bavariya constructs paintings that visually resemble woven textiles and tapestries. His layered compositions draw inspiration from the knitting and weaving practices of his grandmother, transforming memories of domestic craft into contemporary visual language. Through the careful interplay of colour, texture, and perspective, his paintings evoke the density and tactile quality of woven surfaces. In recent works, Bavariya has expanded his practice through the incorporation of discarded and reclaimed fabric, creating textured surfaces that move beyond two-dimensional painting into three-dimensional forms. Torn cloth, exposed threads, and layered fabric fragments introduce physical depth while carrying traces of labour, touch, and material memory. By upcycling waste textiles, he engages with ideas of reuse, transformation, and continuity, while also acknowledging the invisible narratives embedded within everyday materials.

Alongside painting, Bavariya creates woven works using scrap fabrics and threads collected from domestic and rural environments. Rugs, doormats, textiles, and household spaces frequently appear as recurring motifs within his work, reimagined as emotionally layered landscapes that reflect routine, care, and lived experience. These woven compositions function as extensions of his paintings, where the interlacing of threads parallels the layering of brushstrokes on canvas.

Colour harmony plays a central role in his practice. Bavariya approaches colour as both structure and emotion, using layered applications of acrylic paint to create rhythm, tension, and balance across the surface. Each layer accumulates like sediment, holding traces of gesture, time, and emotional residue. His works often suggest simultaneous processes of construction and unraveling — surfaces appear carefully built yet fragile, structured yet open-ended. By integrating painting with weaving methodologies and reclaimed textiles, Bavariya challenges conventional distinctions between fine art and craft. His practice repositions traditional knowledge and domestic labour within contemporary artistic discourse, highlighting the poetic and conceptual potential of overlooked materials and everyday spaces.

Sky woven in fragments, 2025
Acrylic on canvas.

Soft Ruins, 2025
Acrylic ,ink, textile and threads on manjarpat.

Fragments of a Forgotten fabric, 2025
Acrylic ,textile and thread on canvas.

Forest of threads, 2025
Acrylic on canvas.

Amit Saroha

Amit's multidisciplinary practice spans painting, drawing, sculpture, and installation, engaging with themes of interdependence, survival, and transformation.

Saroha's work examines interdependence as a fundamental condition of existence, tracing the fragile yet resilient relationships between biological systems, ecological networks, and sociopolitical structures. His practice reflects an ongoing inquiry into how systems — ecological, social, and political — coexist through reciprocity, imbalance, and continuous transformation. Central to his work is the idea that survival is never an individual act, but a shared process shaped by mutual dependence. Rooted in material experimentation, Saroha's practice is distinguished by an intensive process of controlled burning on paper and canvas. Using unconventional tools such as clothing irons, matchsticks, and heater elements, he transforms surfaces through combustion, allowing marks to emerge through heat, pressure, and erosion. In his work, burning functions simultaneously as a method of mark-making and as metaphor, evoking cycles of destruction, regeneration, memory, and endurance. The scorched surfaces record vulnerability and resistance, becoming visual manifestations of survival and transformation.

Within these burnt and layered compositions, Saroha frequently depicts labourers — particularly stone carriers and construction workers — whose invisible labour forms the foundation of society. Their presence exists alongside animals, birds, ants, scaffoldings, and both organic and inorganic structures, creating interconnected visual ecosystems. These recurring forms suggest the coexistence of natural life, human effort, and built environments, while also reflecting the visible and invisible forces that sustain collective existence. Objects and symbols referencing the past, present, and future are often embedded within his compositions, producing layered narratives of memory and continuity. Through these juxtapositions, Saroha explores how fragility itself can become a site of resilience. Rather than treating material as passive, he approaches it as a living presence capable of resistance, damage, and transformation.

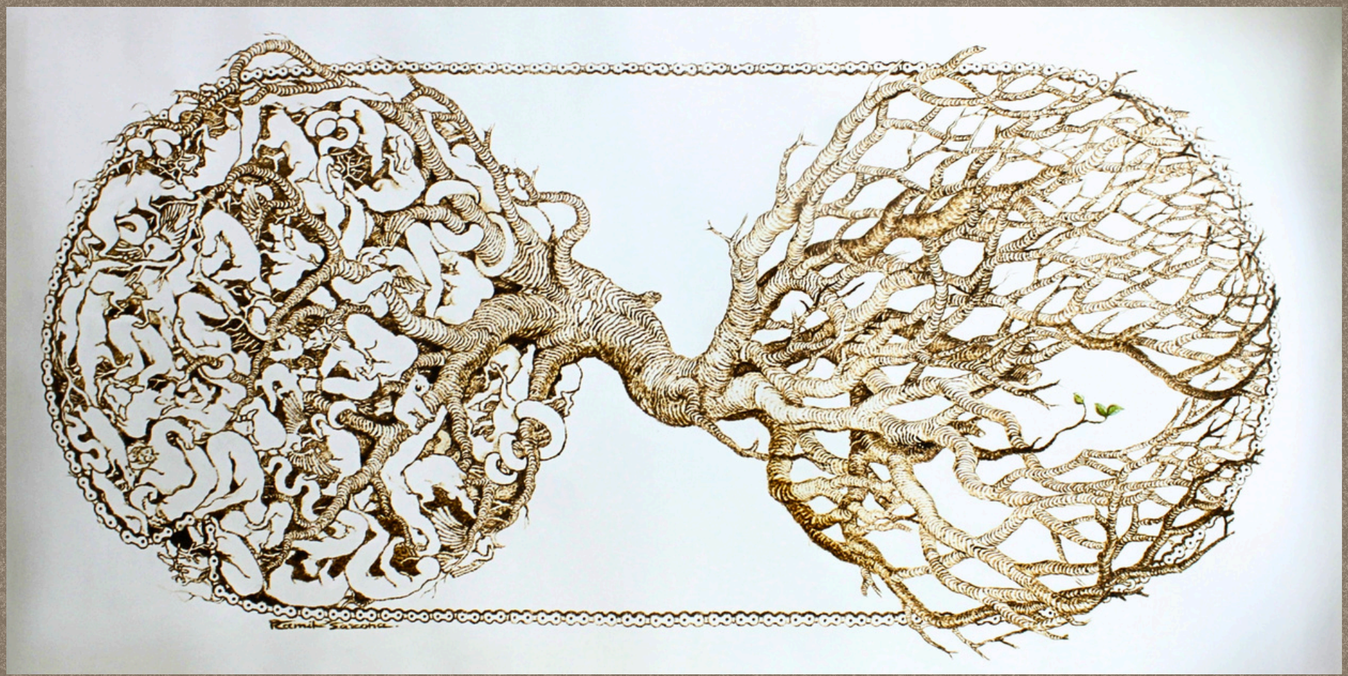
His practice ultimately questions how individuals inhabit interconnected systems responsibly and ethically. By foregrounding vulnerability, erosion, and reciprocity, Saroha's work considers survival as a shared condition shaped through memory, labour, coexistence, and the continuous negotiation between destruction and renewal.

The Silent Toil, 2017
Burnt impressions of clothing iron and matchsticks on canvas..

Satya Hai (It's True), 2017
Impression with clothing iron on canvas.

The Structure of Survival II, 2017
Burnt impression with clothing iron and match sticks on canvas.

The Anatomy of Interdependence II, 2016
Burn on paper.



Anshika Chaudhary

Beyond Silence, 2025
Mixmedia on paper.

Anhsika's practice is rooted in drawing and printmaking, evolving through an ongoing inquiry into inner states of being — the pressures, attractions, pauses, and emotional tensions that shape the mind in everyday life.

While her earlier works explored the relationship between nature and the human body, her recent practice has shifted inward, focusing on psychological and emotional conditions — Avasthas — and the ways emotions emerge, dissolve, and transform within the human psyche. Rather than narrating events, Chaudhary's works register the sensation of inhabiting a particular emotional or mental state. Through drawing, she translates fragility, conflict, pressure, and moments of quiet joy into visual form.

Her imagery often takes shape through fragmented, distorted, or reassembled life-forms that move between the recognizably human and the abstract. These transformations reflect the instability and fluidity of inner experience. Guided by subconscious thought and instinctive gestures, her drawings develop through an intuitive process in which lines, erasures, and layered surfaces evolve gradually without predetermined outcomes. Line remains central to her practice, carrying rhythm, hesitation, repetition, and force — a sensitivity cultivated through years of rigorous life sketching, particularly of the human figure in public spaces. This engagement with observation enables her to stretch, break, and reconstruct forms with emotional precision.

Chaudhary's works resist fixed meanings and instead create contemplative spaces for reflection. By stripping away narrative certainty, she invites viewers to engage with their own emotional experiences and recognize moments of vulnerability, tension, or stillness within themselves. Her practice does not seek to illustrate emotion directly, but to hold it as a shifting condition existing between thought, body, and time.

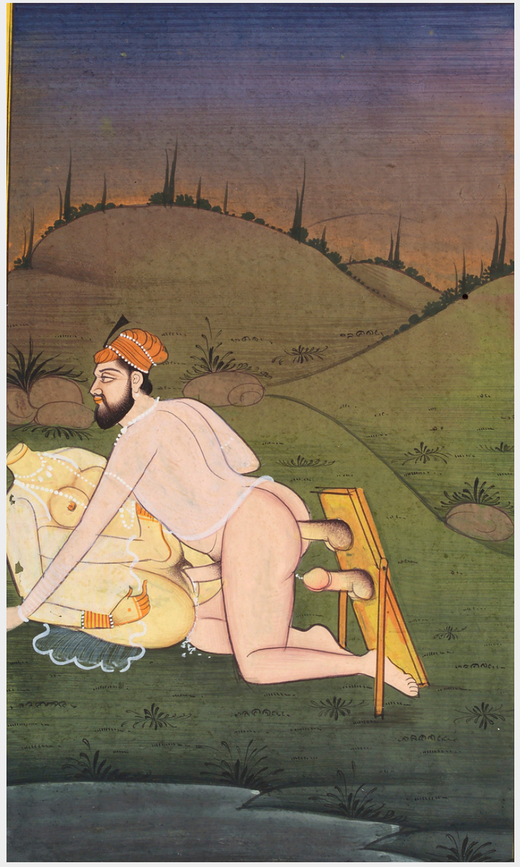
Her ongoing series, Pause, extends this inquiry through a body of drawing-based works that explore moments of stillness, hesitation, and reflection within the human mind. Each composition captures subtle psychological states that arise in everyday life — inner pressure, emotional suspension, quiet joy, and mental unrest. Rather than depicting fixed narratives, the series focuses on transient pauses in thought and feeling, allowing them to unfold through line, form, and layered textures.

Created using mixed media including charcoal, oil pastel, and watercolor washes, the surfaces of these works mirror the accumulation and erosion of mental states. Fragmented and transformed figures inhabit these compositions, embodying the instability of emotion and memory. Pause ultimately functions as a space of contemplation, inviting viewers to inhabit the same quiet tension from which the drawings emerge and to reflect upon their own emotional rhythms and inner conditions.

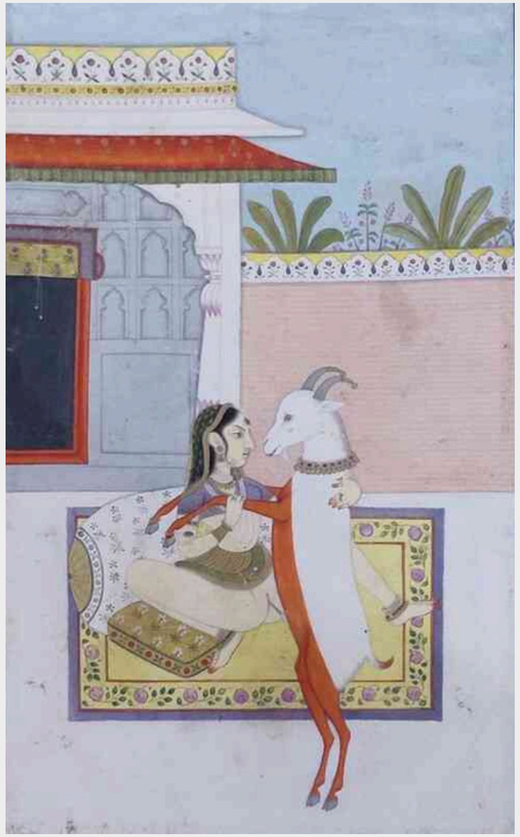
State of Stress II, 2025
Woodcut on paper.

State of Stress I, 2025
Woodcut on paper.

Untitled, 2025
Oil pastel on paper.



A man copulating with a model of a woman, 17th-18th Century. Image courtesy: The Wellcome Collection



A woman having sex with a goat, Album 29,Pahari, Kangra Style, first quarter of the 19th century. Image courtesy: Rampur Raza Library.

Beyond Sensation: Rethinking the Essence of Erotic Art in India

by Gaurav Kumar

Long before dating apps and Bollywood item numbers, India was already fluent in the language of desire—and not shy about putting it in stone. Here, sex wasn't taboo; it was divine. Gods didn't just create the universe with a big bang—they danced, loved, merged, and moaned it into existence. In Indian mythology, pleasure (kama) wasn't a sin—it was a sacred pursuit, ranked right alongside duty (dharma), prosperity (artha), and liberation (moksha). That's right: achieving orgasm could, in theory, help you achieve enlightenment. From the sensuous stone lovers of Khajuraho and Konark, locked forever in tantric twirls, to the smoky Sanskrit of the Kama Sutra, Indian art has always celebrated the erotic as a path to the eternal. Here, Shiva and Shakti's cosmic union isn't just symbolic; it's the universe getting off on itself. Whether etched into temple walls or whispered through the poetry of Jayadeva's Gita Govinda, desire pulses through Indian mythology like a sacred heartbeat, rhythmic and unapologetically aroused.

This paper peels back the silk veil (and perhaps a few dhotis) to explore how Indian art entwines eroticism with myth, not as vulgarity, but as a form of visual theology. So, light a lamp, offer some incense, and prepare to meet Lovers, Mithuna, or a couple who didn't just sit or stand on lotus thrones or a decorated bed; they rocked them.

Let's be honest—when someone says "Indian art," your mind probably goes to majestic temples, shimmering goddesses, or miniature paintings of lovers stealing glances. But zoom in a little closer—and whoa. Is that Krishna pinching Radha's chin? Are those temple walls... doing that?

Yes. Indian art has always known how to flirt.

Only the Present by T. Venkhana, 2024. Image courtesy: Gallery Maskara

The truth is, eroticism and myth in Indian art have been old dance partners. Not sidekicks or side plots—but central characters in the grand story of how we imagined the divine, the human, and everything in between. And unlike modern society's confused love-hate relationship with sexuality, ancient Indian artists weren't shy. They sculpted it, painted it, sang it, and even printed it in calendars stuck above household shrines.

Let's take a walk through stone carvings, painted scrolls, and modern galleries to explore how this steamy yet sacred affair evolved. Start at Khajuraho. No, not with binoculars and a blush, but with curiosity. These 10th-century Chandela temples are practically a Kamasutra carved in sandstone. Limbs tangle, eyebrows arch, and gods don't seem the least bit embarrassed. But hang on!!! Why are these erotic sculptures in a temple? Art historian Vidya Dehejia gives us the answer: these aren't distractions from devotion. They mark the shift from the worldly to the spiritual. They're metaphors. Or, to put it plainly: "You pass through desire to get to the divine" (Dehejia, 1997). You can't skip pleasure on your way to enlightenment in this worldview.

And Khajuraho wasn't alone. Over at Konark Sun Temple, in Odisha, you'll find similarly expressive carvings, couples mid-embrace, in postures that look more like yoga if yoga came with a parental warning. These weren't just artistic experiments. They were cosmological statements. The universe, according to Tantric philosophy, was born from union. The Shiva-Shakti duality was not just a myth; it was the template for everything, from atoms to orgasms. Before "Tantra" (Not Just an Instagram Hashtag) became something you see in overpriced yoga retreats, it was part of a profound tradition where erotic union was sacred. The Yogini temples of Odisha, like the one at Hirapur, feature fierce, sensual female deities-often nude, always powerful. These weren't pin-up goddesses. They were cosmic forces.

As Madhu Khanna (2012) writes, in Tantra, the body isn't a prison for the soul—it's the vessel through which the divine is experienced. That includes the sensual. Especially the sensual. Tantric art flips the script. The goal isn't celibacy. It's clarity. It doesn't say "don't touch." It says "touch with awareness." Fast-forward to the 19th century, when the British arrived, saw our temples, and said, "How scandalous!" Victorian morality met Khajuraho's open embrace of eros, and immediately reached for a curtain. Partha Mitter notes that colonial officials branded this art as "obscene," and Indian reformers, eager to be seen as 'civilized', often agreed (Mitter, 1994). The result? Erotic imagery was whitewashed, buried, or edited out of textbooks. But while the British were pearl-clutching, Kalighat patuas/painters in Bengal were quietly chuckling. In their 19th-century scrolls, gods had flirtatious eyes, and goddesses had curves that could cause spiritual accidents. These artists knew what the colonial gaze didn't: myth and desire have always been entangled.

Jump to the 20th century, and Indian artists began to reclaim what colonialism tried to repress. But this time, it's not just about reviving the past; it's about playing with it, twisting it, making it sweat a little. Indian art has never shied away from the human body; it just had a problem discussing it over the dinner table. Although modern artists like M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza, and Hemendranath Mazumdar did not have problems depicting the human form with aplomb, their approach to the erotic often skirted the issue of the visibly sensual. E.g., M.F. Husain. He paints Bharat Mata nude, and suddenly, all hell breaks loose. But look closer: Husain wasn't mocking tradition. He was showing how deeply myth and the female body were entangled in the Indian imagination and how dangerous that could be politically and socially (Guha-Thakurt, 2004). But at the same time, my understanding is that through the eyes of modernists artist The body—regardless of whether it was that of a woman or a man—began to function as an object of spectacle within such art forms.

This is Not Dark Life by Balbir Krishan, 2011. Image courtesy: Artist

Sculptural breasts, architectural hips, and even the sexual imagery were sometimes almost theatrical, which we can clearly see in the work of F.N Souza. In short, the act of looking was not about whispering the mysteries of sexual desires but about putting the body on display and saying, "Notice this; it is significant." The body was significant, only too often because it was viewed through the eyes of objectification.

Then there's Anjolie Ela Menon, Arpita Singh, and later Pushpamala N, who decided to stop asking permission and just inhabit myth themselves. Pushpamala, especially, does something brilliant; she becomes goddesses from old calendar art, strikes sensual poses, and turns the whole thing into a performance piece (Jain, 2007). She's not mocking. She's mirroring. She's asking, "Who gave you the right to decide what's sacred and what's sexy?"

No conversation about eroticism and myth in India is complete without talking about calendar art/Calendar Gods (Desire on a Budget), those mass-produced images of Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Krishna that hang in kitchens, chai stalls, and autorickshaws.

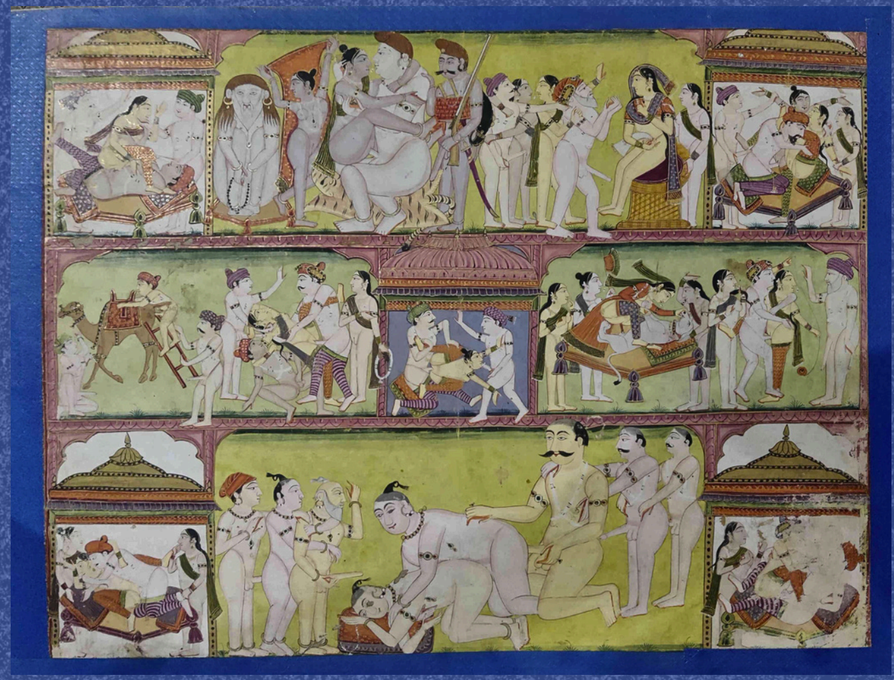
Two Men in Benares by Bhupen Khakhar, 1982. Image courtesy: Sotheby's

Raja Ravi Varma, our 19th-century poster boy, changed the game by painting gods with European-style realism and soft sensuality. His Shakuntala, coyly lifting her sari to pretend she's pulling out a thorn, is about as subtle as a romantic film poster (Guha-Thakurta, 2010). As Kajri Jain points out, these calendars made the gods "available"(Jain, 2007). Sensuality wasn't stripped away—it was printed in thousands and glued to wooden boards. It entered everyday life, not as obscenity, but as a kind of aesthetic intimacy. You don't just worship Lakshmi, you admire her hair. Christopher Pinney calls this the "vernacular modernity" of India, where desire and devotion coexist in a laminated frame (Pinney, 2004). Here again, I would like to highlight the tradition of erotic miniature; from the lyrical verses of Gita Govinda to the twilight of the miniature painting tradition, Indian art has never shied away from blending bhakti with eroticism. In fact, it often thrived on their tension. Miniature painters across regions repeatedly returned to Krishna's raasleela, not as a sanitized spiritual metaphor, but as a celebration of intimacy, where Radha and Krishna appear not just in divine union, but in scenes of erotic lovemaking, their bodies entwined with unmistakable sensuality.

But this erotic thread in Indian art runs far deeper and darker than romantic devotion. During the Mughal and later Rajput periods, artists painted everything, and I mean everything. There are scenes where male figures engage with animals, where rishis seduce or are seduced by their disciples, where kings entertain themselves with both queens and courtesans, sometimes with male attendants and even explicit male-to-male sex. So, Same sex thing is never new to India; it was already there. Some paintings depict nearly every position from the Kamasutra in rich visual detail. Many of these works survive today, hidden away in private collections, in restricted museum archives, or in storage rooms labelled "sensitive material." And here's the uncomfortable question: Are audiences ready to look at this art? Can you walk into a gallery and stand in front of one of these paintings with your family? Can you view it without embarrassment, defensiveness, or shame? Are we really prepared, not just to see, but to see without flinching? In this context lets talk about contemporary times, Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003), someone who started off his career balancing the books but ended up upsetting the entire ledger of morality. He is considered to be one of the first gay artists from India and also one of the pioneers of the Narrative Figurative genre. As an individual trained as a chartered accountant (one of the few professions where numbers are less capricious than human beings), Khakhar moved to Baroda during the sixties. This is where he created his personal visual vocabulary, which was unabashedly personal, humorous, and biographical. His paintings included barbers, grocers, clerks, and middle-class males, real people rather than larger-than-life mythological figures. Works like Two Men in Benares place same-sex relationships in explicitly Indian contexts, religious towns, homes, and buildings. The point was implied rather than explicitly made, but its meaning was clear: queer attraction did not need to be imported or a vestige of colonization. It was already present, silent, persistent, and historical. It is impossible not to see the irony inherent in this context. Until today, in 2026, while I am drafting this essay for HGC, an alarming number of individuals still view same-sex attraction as an import, somewhere in between colonial administration and Hollywood movies. The humor in this misunderstanding gains clarity in light of modern cultural discourse. In April 2026, a popular belief was spread following Pakistani transgender Activist Hina Baloch's (2026) statement during her interview on the Queer Global YouTube Channel that "80% of Pakistanis are gay, while 20% are bisexual." While the quote should be more appropriately filed under "viral hyperbole" than any demographic truth, its spread illustrates an all too common practice in culture: discussing sexual matters as gossip, show, or joke, not as history. And one may wonder, do we need to wait for a statement by Rakhi Sawant stating a statistical percentage of Indian passion before recognizing that which temple walls, miniature art, and modern painting have been indicating all along? Khakhar had already provided this answer years ago, not with statistics, not with a show, and definitely not with approval. The true scandal, perhaps, was not the inclusion of the erotic imagery itself but the demand that these images be familiar. While Khakhar did not paint lovers in myths ensconced within the depths of enchanted forests, he chose instead to paint lovers who could walk alongside us when we wait for our tickets at the bus station, or lovers who could be standing right next to us while traveling in the same metro train with the help of the Rider app. Now, it wasn't some distant thing anymore, but rather something that belonged within the realm of our daily life. The figures in his paintings did not conform to the standards of classical paintings that portrayed youthful and smooth-looking nude figures. Eros itself becomes grotesque, absurd, and surprisingly soft here. It is not the perfect body of a monument; it is a flawed and human one. The religious iconography, phallic lingams, shrines, and monstrous beings coexist with erotic scenes in a way that indicates that eros and devotion may not be enemies but rather lost relatives who have been separated by etiquette. By the late nineties, Khakhar's technique with watercolors became liquid, almost plastic, and focused on sensations. But besides artistry, what Khakhar gave to us was a political gift, an image language of queer sexuality where silence was proper behavior. If Khakhar's whispers revealed truth in the domestic sphere, T. Venkanna (1980) entered the gallery armed with a megaphone. An artist from Telangana who studied at the Faculty of Fine Arts at M.S. University of Baroda, Venkanna quickly established himself as a provocateur in modern Indian art. However, Venkanna's art is not an invitation to discomfort; it makes it welcome and asks tough questions.

Under the patronage of gallerists like Abhay Maskara, Venkanna created his art style, which involves a combination of painting, prints, and embroidery, with deeply personal stories. The artist has not been shy to use graphic images, including the depiction of phallic structures, grotesque forms, and other surreal representations. However, the disturbing nature of his art is complemented by humor, dark and irreverent humor aimed at social hypocrisy. Eroticism for him comes across more as an act of provocation than one of seduction. He does not offer us anything like decorative eroticism but engages us in acts of psychological confession, which are messy, clumsy, and definitely human. In October 2024, as a curator with one of India's oldest art gallery Art Konsult, I curated an exhibition for Awani Kant's (1951) wife, Ratnabali Kant (a recognized sculptor, painter, and performer. She is also known as a pioneer of performative visual art and installation performance in India), the show titled was "In Soft Strokes the art of Awani Kant." Putting up this exhibition offered me an insight into how sensual works can engage not by shocking the viewer but by building something much deeper.

The curatorial endeavor helps build the context to better understand the visual language used by Kant, where his eroticism is contemplative rather than theatrical. As compared to Venkanna, who takes a dramatic approach in his art, the works of Awani Kant show how eroticism can just as well be expressed quietly. The artist is popular because of his striking "Blue Period." In this period, Kant developed his style through exposure to life in Greece, as well as training by great artists such as Ramkinkar Baij and K.G. Subramanyan. In such light-filled spaces, the human form becomes neither subject nor object, but rather symbol. Melons gape invitingly, birds nestle in unlikely positions, and blossoms speak symbolically. The images thus assume an almost poetic character by implying emotional and bodily openness without becoming literal. Kant employs erotic imagery that is lyrical and optimistic, not shocking, but joyously celebratory. Well before the sexual politics of our times entered the public domain, Avinash Chandra was elevating the human figure to cosmology. His images were influenced by European modernists like Vincent van Gogh and Chaim Soutine, but were always rooted in his native Indian culture, drawing especially upon temple sculptures and the iconography of Tantrism associated with sites like Khajuraho. His poetry flowed like liquid lava, inevitable, fluid, and sometimes overpowering. In his work, sexuality was neither an adornment nor an afterthought but rather a fundamental element of nature, a force of creation and destruction, which affected the body and the universe as a whole.



Album 31, Rajasthani Style, probably first half of the 20th century. Image courtesy: Rampur Raza Library.

More contemporary curatorial approaches, spearheaded by individuals like Abhay Maskara, have redefined erotic art as a serious subject of study and thought instead of sensationalism. In exhibits that delve into voyeurism, space, and materials, eroticism is no longer simply about revealing, but rather about seeing and being seen, and why either makes us uneasy. Of all the practitioners today, Balbir Krishan (1973) is one of the bravest individuals. Being a gay and double amputee himself, Krishan's paintings feature a great deal of boldness in terms of the themes. More specifically, he portrays men's bodies using bright colors and sharp lines. However, these depictions have nothing decorative about them; instead, they represent declarations of life and existence. It is noteworthy that the artist tries to break the social practice of ignoring the queer theme by providing viewers with close shots of male couples.

Having talked about numerous male artists, whether heterosexual or homosexual, one might wonder if any woman artist has dealt with eroticism directly in their artworks. While Amrita Sher-Gil did depict herself with a very clear physical identity, there were not many famous women artists who took up the subject directly. However, in contemporary times, there is a woman painter, Gargi Chandola, who has used symbolism to highlight this subject, and her use of motifs like fruits as a depiction of male & female genitalia in miniature art forms is well known. This raises an important question: why does this genre still witness hesitation among women artists?

The truth is, even many academics, museum professionals, and self-proclaimed cultural intellectuals avoid the subject. They downplay it, label it "obscene," or conveniently classify it as "not for public viewing." They'll speak endlessly about form, colour, and technique, but go silent the moment sex enters the frame. Why does this happen? Because we've severed our connection with our visual past. We want the glory of Indian tradition, but not the complexity. We want temples, but not the mithuna sculptures on their walls. We want Krishna, but only in flute-playing innocence, not in erotic rapture with Radha. We want to protect "culture" without ever confronting the wild, sensual, deeply human art that culture actually produced. So the problem isn't the paintings. The problem is us and what we refuse to see.

So, what do we learn from this grand affair between eroticism and myth in Indian art? It is that the body was always there; only the discussion around it came along later. Whether it be the erotic sculptures of temples or modern paintings, desire has been captured with an astounding amount of truthfulness; sometimes heavenly, sometimes humorous, often uncomfortable. It may be that the true comedy lies not in the artwork but rather in the embarrassment surrounding it. Museums exhibit bodies shamelessly, yet viewers have been known to feign an interest in paintbrush techniques, studiously ignoring the glaringly obvious.
In the end, the true essence of erotic art in India does not lie in its ability to shock. Instead, it lies in its ability to be visible, vulnerable, unforgettable, and persistent; attributes that persist no matter how politely one chooses to ignore it. That we weren't always this shy. That the sacred wasn't always sanitized. That gods and goddesses didn't mind being lovers, dancers, and sometimes flirts. That myth wasn't cold and distant; it was flesh and fire, longing and laughter. Of course, today's political climate complicates things. Art gets censored. Films get banned. Eroticism is still policed. But the artists keep painting, sculpting, and snapping photos. The myths, it turns out, are not fragile. They're fiery. They can take the heat. And maybe that's the final secret Indian art teaches us: You can be divine, and still be deliciously, deliriously human.

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Online source

- "'80% of Pakistan Is Gay, Rest 20% Bisexual': Transgender Activist Hina Baloch in Viral Video," Moneycontrol, April 2, 2026, https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/80-of-pakistan-is-gay-rest-20-is-bisexual-transgender-activist-hina-baloch-in-viral-video-13878059.html

Chandan Singh

Chandan Singh is a painter from the Bundelkhand region, currently based in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh. His artistic practice emerges from lived experience and is deeply rooted in the rhythms, textures, and emotional landscapes of rural life. Working primarily with acrylic paintings and Ink drawings, Singh has developed a distinctive technique of making De-collages made by using jute. Drawing inspiration from agricultural environments, local communities, and everyday village experiences, Singh's work reflects a profound engagement with memory, labour, and cultural inheritance.

Rice and wheat fields, farmers, cattle, husk, and jute frequently appear within his paintings—not merely as visual motifs but as carriers of collective memory, lived histories, and traditional knowledge. In an era marked by rapid industrialization, urban expansion, and cultural globalization, Singh turns to the village as both a personal archive and a broader cultural metaphor through which he explores questions of identity, belonging, and continuity.

His paintings navigate the complex relationships between self and place, tradition and change, joy and hardship. Drawing from folktales, songs, family narratives, and childhood memories, his works capture the evolving realities of contemporary rural life. Themes of agriculture, kinship, migration, and the shifting relationship between village and city unfold through compositions that balance tenderness with resilience.

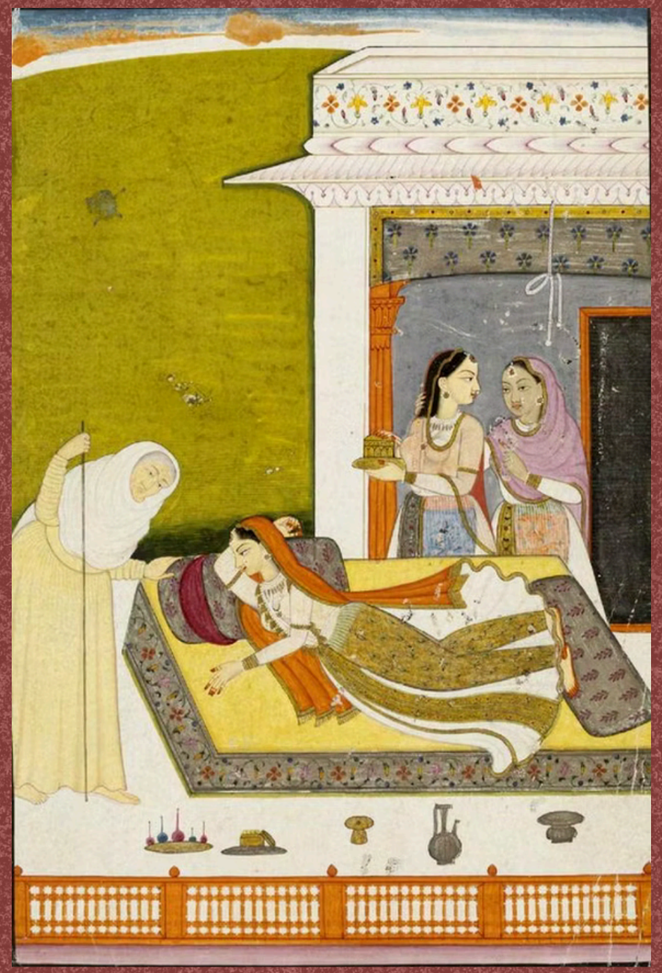
Rather than romanticizing rural existence, Singh's practice attends closely to its nuances and contradictions. His works acknowledge both the struggles and celebrations embedded within village life, bearing witness to its quiet endurance, disappointments, aspirations, and transformations. Through this engagement, Singh creates visual narratives that invite viewers to reflect upon their own relationships to memory, land, displacement, and belonging.

Bakhari, 2024
Cutting grass board and drawings on paper.

बरद्वारा-2 (Bardwara - 2), 2024
Acrylic on canvas.

Village Memories, 2022
De-collage with paper.

Untitled, 2024
Drawing on paper.



Prositpatika Nayika (above), 1770-80c., Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi

Abhisārikā Nāyikā (right), 1660 CE School: Mewar School (Rajasthani painting tradition), Image courtesy: Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art

Carved Emotions: Understanding the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā in Art

A Study of Embodied Emotion in Classical Indian Temple Sculpture

by Dr. Pratishtha Mukherjee

The Aṣṭa-Nāyikā, a canonical system of eight heroic emotional states rooted in classical Sanskrit aesthetic theory, has long been examined through the lenses of literature, poetry, and performance. This paper shifts the analytical focus to temple sculpture, arguing that the visual translation of these emotional types constitutes a distinct and significant aesthetic practice. Drawing on material evidence from medieval temple sites across South Asia and theoretical frameworks drawn from Nāṭyaśāstra-based rasa theory, the paper explores how sculptors transformed abstract emotional categories—longing, anger, betrayal, reunion, and others—into embodied visual form. It contends that far from being merely decorative, these carved heroines functioned as affective architecture, shaping the emotional experience of sacred space. The study contributes to growing scholarly conversations about the relationship between textual aesthetics, bodily knowledge, and the materiality of devotional art.

The study of emotion in classical Indian thought has rarely been confined to the interior life of an individual. In the ancient Indian aesthetic tradition, emotion was/ is understood as a transpersonal phenomenon, a condition that, when properly cultivated, could be shared between artist and audience, or between the sacred image and its viewer. Nowhere is this more evident than in the doctrine of rasa, first systematised in Bharata Muni's Nāṭyaśāstra, which proposed that aesthetic experience arises when emotional states (bhāvas) are evoked through a refined combination of gestures, context, and expression (Ghosh, 1951; Levi, 1920). Within this framework, the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā or the eight types of the heroines, emerged as a canonical taxonomy of female emotional experience in relation to love and longing. Each nāyikā type represents a distinct emotional condition: the woman adorning herself in anticipation of her beloved (svādhīna-bhartṛkā), the one abandoned or betrayed (khaṇḍitā), the one separated by distance (virahotkanthitā), and so forth (Miller, 1977; Dehejia, 1997).

These types were elaborated across literary texts, dramatic manuals, and poetic anthologies, forming a rich vocabulary for the expression of srngāra rasa—the aesthetic of love. Yet the Aṣṭa-Nāyikā did not remain confined to text. From the medieval period onward, particularly between the ninth and thirteenth centuries CE, images identifiable as nāyikā types proliferated across temple walls and pillars throughout the Indian subcontinent (Desai, 1975). This paper asks: what happens when emotional categories become stone? How did sculptors give material form to states as fugitive as longing or as volatile as rage? And what does this visual corpus tell us about the relationship between aesthetic theory, artistic practice, and sacred space?

Rasa and the Body: Theoretical Foundations

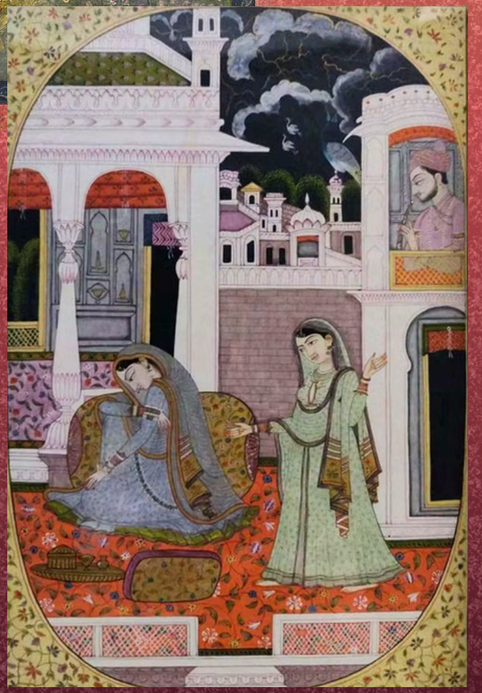
The Nāṭyaśāstra establishes a detailed vocabulary for the communication of emotion through the body. Chapters VI through XXIV describe specific configurations of the eyes, hands, brows, feet, and torso, each combination corresponding to a particular emotional state (Ghosh, 1951). This somatic grammar was not merely theatrical instruction; it constituted a theory of how meaning adheres to bodily form. The body, in this view, is not a neutral container of emotion but its primary medium. Abhinavagupta's eleventh-century commentary on the Nāṭyaśāstra, the Abhinavabhāratī, deepened this understanding by situating rasa as a mode of consciousness that transcends ordinary emotional response. For Abhinavagupta, the aesthetic experience of rasa involves a dissolution of the ordinary self and a participation in a universalised emotional state, what he called sādhāraṇīkaraṇa, or generalisation of feeling (Masson and Patwardhan, 1969).

This philosophical elaboration has direct implications for understanding temple sculpture: the stone nāyikā is not a portrait of private feeling but an invitation to enter into a shared affective condition. Scholars such as Dehejia (1997) and Kramrisch (1981) have argued that the placement of erotic and emotional imagery in temple contexts is consistent with this understanding. The temple was conceived as a totality a microcosm of the universe in which every sensory register, including emotion, had its proper place. Sculptural programmes were designed not merely to narrate but to evoke, to cultivate in the viewer the affective states appropriate to devotion and aesthetic refinement.

The Eight Types in Stone: Visual Strategies

The identification of specific nāyikā types in sculpture is not always straightforward. Unlike literary texts, which can name and describe, sculptural images must communicate through posture, gesture, facial expression, attribute, and compositional relationship. Nevertheless, art historians have developed reliable criteria for identifying key types within the corpus (Desai, 1975; Sivaramamurti, 1974). The abhisārikā, the woman who ventures out to meet her beloved is often depicted in motion, her body inclined forward, her garments suggesting haste or the wind of night travel. The vipralabdhā, betrayed by her lover, may be shown turning away, her ornaments displaced, her expression conveying controlled anguish rather than open weeping. The khaṇḍitā, angered by evidence of her lover's infidelity often signalled in texts by marks of another woman upon his body is rendered with a posture of confrontation, the tilt of the head and the angle of the arm expressing accusation without verbal speech (Miller, 1977). These visual translations draw on the same bodily grammar articulated in the Nāṭyaśāstra but adapt it to the constraints and possibilities of stone.

A sculptor working in high relief on a temple wall could not replicate the full range of movement available to a dancer; instead, a single arrested gesture had to carry the entire emotional weight of the type. This compression is not a failure of translation but a productive transformation the stillness of stone amplifying the intensity of the emotional moment captured within it. Workshop traditions played a significant role in establishing and transmitting these visual conventions. The recurrence of particular gestural formulae across geographically distant sites from the Khajuraho temples of Madhya Pradesh to the Hoysala temples of Karnataka suggests shared artistic training and the circulation of pattern books or oral conventions (Harle, 1994). At the same time, local styles introduced variation: the elongated proportions of Orissan sculpture, for example, produce a different affective register from the more compact and muscular figures of Chalukya carving.



(from left to right)
Utkanthita Nayika, 1760 CE, Image courtesy: Folio from a Rasikapriya (The Connoisseur's Delights) of Kesavadasa. Rajasthan, Uniara.

Khandita Nayika, 1810-1820c. (Kangra School), Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

Swadhinaptika Nayika, 19th century, Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi. (above).

Vāsakasajjā Nāyikā, 1800 CE School: Pahari (Garhwal/Kangra tradition), Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi. (below).

Vipralabdhā Nāyikā, 18 th century, Chamba School of paintings, , Image courtesy: National Museum, New Delhi.

Abhisandhita Nayika, 19 th c (Kangra School), Collections of Govt. Museum and Art Gallery, Chandigarh Kangra.

Sacred Space and Affective Architecture
The placement of nāyikā figures within temple architecture was rarely arbitrary. Bracket figures and śālabhañjikā (woman-and-tree) types were typically positioned at transitional zones: doorways, balconies, and the junctions between architectural elements (Kramrisch, 1981). These liminal positions are significant. As a devotee moved from the exterior of the temple toward the sanctum, they passed through a progressive intensification of sacred space, and the emotional imagery carved along this path functioned as a kind of affective preparation an education in feeling appropriate to the encounter with the divine. Donaldson (1985) has observed that in Orissan temples, the nāyikā types are distributed across the temple's vertical registers in ways that correspond to the emotional journey of devotion itself: from the more externalised states of longing and anticipation at the base, to states of greater interiority and spiritual resolution at higher levels. Whether or not such programmes were always consciously designed, they reflect an understanding of sculpture as capable of shaping emotional experience across time and movement not simply an object to be looked at, but an environment to be inhabited.

This understanding resonates with recent scholarship in the anthropology of art and sensory studies, which has emphasised the active role of material objects in generating and sustaining emotional states (Gell, 1998; Pinney, 2004). The nāyikā carved in stone is not a representation of emotion but an actant within a field of affective relations—a presence that calls forth in the viewer a corresponding inner state.

Conclusion
The Aṣṭa-Nāyikā in temple sculpture represents a remarkable convergence of aesthetic theory, bodily knowledge, and sacred practice. When sculptors carved these eight emotional types onto temple walls, they were not simply illustrating literary texts. They were making emotional knowledge visible, durable, and spatially operative. In doing so, they created what we might call an affective architecture a built environment designed to cultivate, guide, and refine the emotional life of those who moved through it.

This study has argued that understanding this corpus requires moving beyond iconographic identification toward a fuller engagement with the sculptural body as a medium of knowledge. Posture, gesture, facial expression, and compositional placement all carry meaning that exceeds any single textual source. The nāyikā in stone is a creative interpretation, not a copy—a transformation of abstract emotional taxonomy into embodied visual form. Future scholarship would benefit from more systematic study of the distribution of nāyikā types across regional traditions and periods, as well as from closer attention to the material conditions of sculptural production the tools, workshops, and patronage networks that shaped what emotions could be carved, and where. The archive of carved emotion that survives in India's medieval temples remains incompletely read, and its full implications for our understanding of classical Indian aesthetics, religious practice, and the history of emotion have yet to be exhausted.

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The Faded Boat, 2025
Woodcut on paper.

Hrishikesh Sarma

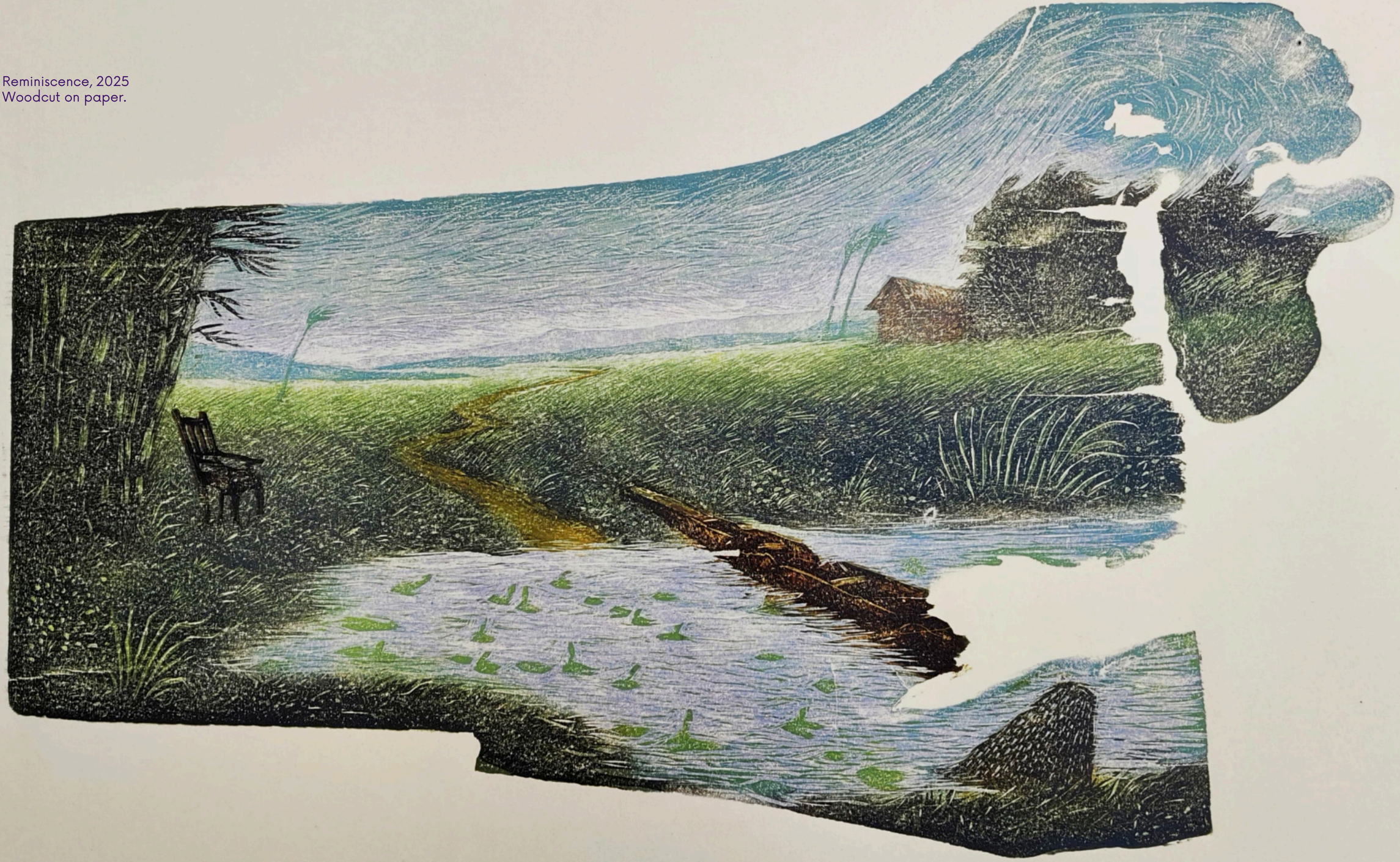
Hrishikesh's practice is rooted in printmaking, particularly woodcut, through which he explores an intimate and emotional relationship with nature.

Sarma's work engages with nature not only as a subject but also as a process of reflection and connection. Drawn to the stillness, rhythm, and emotional calm found within natural environments, he approaches greenery and landscape as spaces where thought and feeling gradually take form. For him, nature exists beyond observation; it becomes an emotional presence through which inner experiences are understood and expressed. Through symbolic imagery, Sarma translates personal emotions into visual language. These symbols function as mediators between his internal world and the natural environment, enabling him to articulate states of feeling that often remain unspoken. His works are marked by quiet sensitivity, where forms emerge gradually through layered textures, organic rhythms, and contemplative compositions.

Woodcut printmaking holds a central significance in his practice. The physical engagement with wood — preparing the surface, carving into it, and responding to its grain — establishes a dialogue between material and emotion. Sarma embraces the unpredictability of the medium, allowing the wood to resist, respond, and reveal its own character. This interaction mirrors the organic and uncontrollable processes found in nature itself.

The repetitive and layered process of printing is deeply meditative for the artist. Each layer of colour accumulates gradually, echoing the way emotions and memories gather over time within a landscape. The slowness of printmaking becomes integral to his practice, encouraging attentiveness, patience, and a sustained engagement with both material and process.
Through his prints, Sarma seeks to create spaces of quiet reflection where nature, material, and emotion coexist. His works are not direct representations of the natural world, but extensions of an internal landscape shaped by calmness, sensitivity, and an enduring connection to nature.

Reminiscence, 2025
Woodcut on paper.



Reminiscence, 2025
Woodcut on paper.

Reminiscence, 2025
Woodcut on on Gamosa.

Lata Joshi

Lata's practice was rooted initially in structured and analytical modes of thinking, her artistic journey gradually evolved toward exploring the emotional, sensory, and intangible dimensions of human experience. Joshi's work reflects a deep engagement with the quiet spaces between logic and intuition — moments where light, colour, memory, and feeling communicate beyond language. Through painting, she investigates personal transformation alongside broader reflections on identity, perception, and existence. Her practice is marked by an openness to experimentation across mediums and materials, allowing each work to develop through a process of discovery and emotional resonance. Currently working primarily with oil paint, Joshi explores the layered complexities of human nature, including emotion, contradiction, vulnerability, and inner depth.

Her series Astitva (Existence) unfolds as a nuanced dialogue between scripts, symbols, and lived realities of womanhood. Drawing upon visual languages such as godana (traditional tattoo motifs), the works engage with memory, cultural identity, and the embodied experiences carried across generations. Through layered surfaces and symbolic imagery, Joshi creates contemplative spaces where personal narratives intersect with collective histories and feminine experience.

Astitva, 2025
Oil painting on canvas.

Shaping identities II, 2025
Oil painting on canvas.

In her series Shaping Identities II, Joshi reflects on the paradox of identity and the ways society shapes, defines, and often distances individuals from their authentic selves. Comprising four paintings inspired by personal experiences, the series examines the tension between societal expectations and inner freedom. A recurring figure within the works is a young girl absorbed in sewing clothes for her dolls — a symbol of instinctive creativity untouched by external pressures. In contrast, elements such as a suspended horse-ride swing evoke the relentless race of social conditioning, where expectations of success, visibility, and admiration gradually reshape the individual. As the narrative progresses, the grown woman confronts the memory of her childhood self while surrounded by observing and judgmental gazes. Her shadow emerges as a metaphor for her true nature, reclaiming the act of creation and suggesting the persistence of the authentic self beneath imposed identities.

Untitled, 2023
Ink on paper.

Untitled, 2023
Ink on paper.

Marble Inlay as a Living Craft: Contemporary Practices in Agra

by Sahiba

One of the most advanced decorative customs in the Indian subcontinent is marble inlay art, commonly referred to as pachchikari or parchin kari. The method creates elaborate calligraphic, geometric, and floral patterns by carefully embedding semi-precious stones into marble surfaces. This craft, which is mostly practiced in Agra, is strongly linked to Mughal architecture and is still passed down through artisan communities. Despite the fact that marble inlay has been widely recognized for its aesthetic value and historical relevance, most of the research that is currently available concentrates on its stylistic and architectural features or on other inlay traditions, such wood-based techniques. Marble inlay has received little attention as a live skill, especially when it comes to the economic background of artists today. Moreover, research that focus on the daily activities of Agra craftspeople are lacking. This work combines field-based observations with historical analysis in an effort to close these gaps.

Scholarly discussions on traditional crafts emphasize their role as expressions of cultural identity and artistic innovation. Studies on inlay work in India have largely focused on wood-based traditions and regional practices, while marble inlay has often been examined within the framework of Mughal architecture.

The study by Roy Shipra,(2023) inlay crafts in India emphasize their role as expressions of creativity, technical skill, and cultural identity, particularly in traditions such as Mysore Rosewood inlay from Mysuru. These works, often based on ethnographic approaches, explore workshop practices, artisan decision-making, and the intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge, while also examining the transformation of traditional designs in response to changing socio-economic conditions and material constraints. However, much of this research remains focused on wood-based inlay traditions and their regional contexts. In comparison, limited scholarly attention has been given to marble inlay art, especially regarding its contemporary practice, artisan experiences, and socio-economic realities in regions such as Agra, thereby indicating a clear need for focused study in this area.

Image courtesy: Sahiba

Image courtesy: Sahiba

The study by Singh, Bhumika,(2023) Research on inlay crafts, particularly Mysore Rosewood inlay practiced in Mysuru, focuses on craft practices, creativity, and artisan-based knowledge systems. Such studies adopt ethnographic approaches to examine workshop practices, decisionmaking processes, and the intergenerational transmission of skills. They also explore the transformation of traditional crafts in response to socio-economic changes, material constraints, and evolving design preferences. However, this body of research remains largely centered on wood-based inlay traditions, indicating a lack of focused studies on marble inlay practices and artisan experiences in regions such as Agra.

Origin and Historical Development

Agra is known for two stone craft traditions. The older of these is stone carving and the other stone craft of Agra is inlay work popularly recognised as the craft of Taj Mahal(Google Arts & Culture, n.d.). The origins of marble inlay in India are still up for debate among academics. Some historians claim that it originated in the Italian pietre dure tradition, while others contend that it developed gradually within the Indian subcontinent through older stone-based decorative techniques. The Qila-i-KuhnaMosque inDelhi is one example of a pre-Mughal example that shows early experimentation with stone embellishment. During the Mughal era, the skill attained its pinnacle of sophistication, especially under ShahJahan's patronage. Monuments like Itimad-ud-Daulah's Tomb,Akbar's Tomb atSikandra, and buildings inside Agra Fort show how marble inlay evolved. The Taj Mahal, whose marble inlay gained unmatched refinement through elaborate floral and calligraphic decorations created entirely by hand, is the pinnacle of this creative growth.

Materials, Tools and Technique

The main material used in marble inlay art is premium white marble, which is frequently obtained from Makrana and is prized for its smooth texture and longevity. A wide range of semiprecious stones are carefully chosen for their color and aesthetic appeal, including mother-ofpearl, agate, jasper, lapis lazuli, and malachite. Compasses are used for design marking, chisels are used for engraving, and drills are used to make accurate holes in the marble surface. For fine detailing, traditional tools like tankiya and narzi are utilized, while emery wheels and abrasive stones help shape and polish the materials.

A design is first transferred onto the marble surface, and then the areas for the inlay are carefully engraved. Then, using adhesive materials, the stones are carved into fine shapes and inserted into these grooves. After that, the surface is polished and smoothed to produce a smooth, glossy finish. The procedure is still mostly manual despite little technology advancements, which reflects the artisans' dexterity and ability.

Marble Inlay as a Living Craft Practice

Marble inlay is being done in Agra today in karkhanas, or workshops, where artisanal skills are passed down through the generations. Many craftsmen are from Muslim artisan families that are inherited, and they can frequently trace their ancestry back to the craftspeople who worked on Mughal structures. The majority of the learning process is practice-based, requiring years of observation and practical instruction. Field observations show that the scale and type of production have changed, but the procedures are still consistent with conventional ways. Craftspeople currently create a variety of items for both domestic and foreign markets, including tabletops, coasters, and decorative panels, in addition to architectural embellishment. This shift demonstrates how the craft can adapt to shifting economic circumstances.

Image courtesy: Sahiba

Iconography and Design Elements
Mughal-inspired geometric and floral themes are the main characteristics of marble inlay designs. However, aspects of regional cultural symbols are also incorporated into modern procedures. Hindu iconography-related motifs like the lotus, peacock, and kalash are sometimes included into designs, especially in goods meant for the Indian market. The dynamic and syncretic nature of the trade is demonstrated by this merging of artistic traditions.

DESIGN:
The major styles of design motifs and patterns used are:
GEOMETRIC : Human and animal figures are typically avoided in Islamic art, particularly in religious contexts. Consequently, artists created non-figurative forms like calligraphy, geometric patterns, and arabesque motifs. Although flower themes and other natural elements are employed, the focus is still on ornamental and abstract design rather than reality.

FLORAL: The design that is most popular style in Pachikari is floral themes, which include a range of flowers, blossoms, leaves, jaal, botanical features, etc. The Mughals had a profound affection for flowers and believed that paradise was a garden.

Image courtesy: Sahiba

ARABESQUE: Pachikari items frequently feature arabesque themes, which are a type of abstracted nature. The abstract designs are reflected and repeated, drawing inspiration from natural plants and flowers, curving leaves, stalks, and blossoms.

CALLIGRAPHY: Since Islamic culture places a high value on written language, calligraphy is an essential component of the design vocabulary.

Contemporary Challenges and Socio-Economic Conditions

Even while marble inlay art is well-known throughout the world, it now faces a number of difficulties. The demand for handcrafted goods has been affected by the growth of machinemade replicas and less expensive substitutes. The price of production has also gone up due to the rising cost of raw materials.The financial situation of craftsmen is a major worry. Field conversations reveal that a large number of artisans are underpaid for their hard labor. Financial instability is frequently caused by the existence of middlemen and an unequal distribution of profits. The long-term sustainability of the trade is also threatened by newer generations' decreasing enthusiasm in carrying on the tradition because of their poor financial conditions.

According to Subhash Emporium (2025), the marble inlay art of Agra faces challenges such as counterfeit products, use of synthetic materials, and declining authenticity in the market. One of the most significant impacts of counterfeiting is felt by traditional artisans. These individuals rely on the sale of authentic pachekari pieces not merely for their livelihood but also for the continued recognition of their art form. The rise of cheap, imitation products undercuts their hard work and dedication, often leaving them at a competitive disadvantage. Tourists and collectors, drawn to the beauty of pachekari, may unknowingly purchase these unauthentic products, believing they are acquiring an original piece of art that reflects the rich cultural heritage of Agra.(Subhash Emporium,2025).

Conclusion

The artistic brilliance of the Mughal era and the enduring abilities of modern craftspeople are both reflected in marble inlay art, which is a wonderful example of continuity between the past and present. The study shows that although the craft maintains its traditional methods and aesthetic values, it has also changed to meet shifting consumer needs through product diversification and innovative design. The socioeconomic circumstances of Agra's artisans, however, are still a cause for concern despite its widespread recognition. Problems including low pay, reliance on middlemen, and competition from machine-made replicas present significant obstacles. The sustainability of this traditional craft is further threatened by the declining interest of newer generations. Therefore, in order to guarantee the continuance and preservation of this art form, supportive measures like as fair trade procedures, skill development programs, and increased consumer awareness are desperately needed. In the end, marble inlay needs to be viewed as a living craft that needs to be acknowledged, preserved, and continuously practiced in the modern world rather than only as a historical relic.

Reverences

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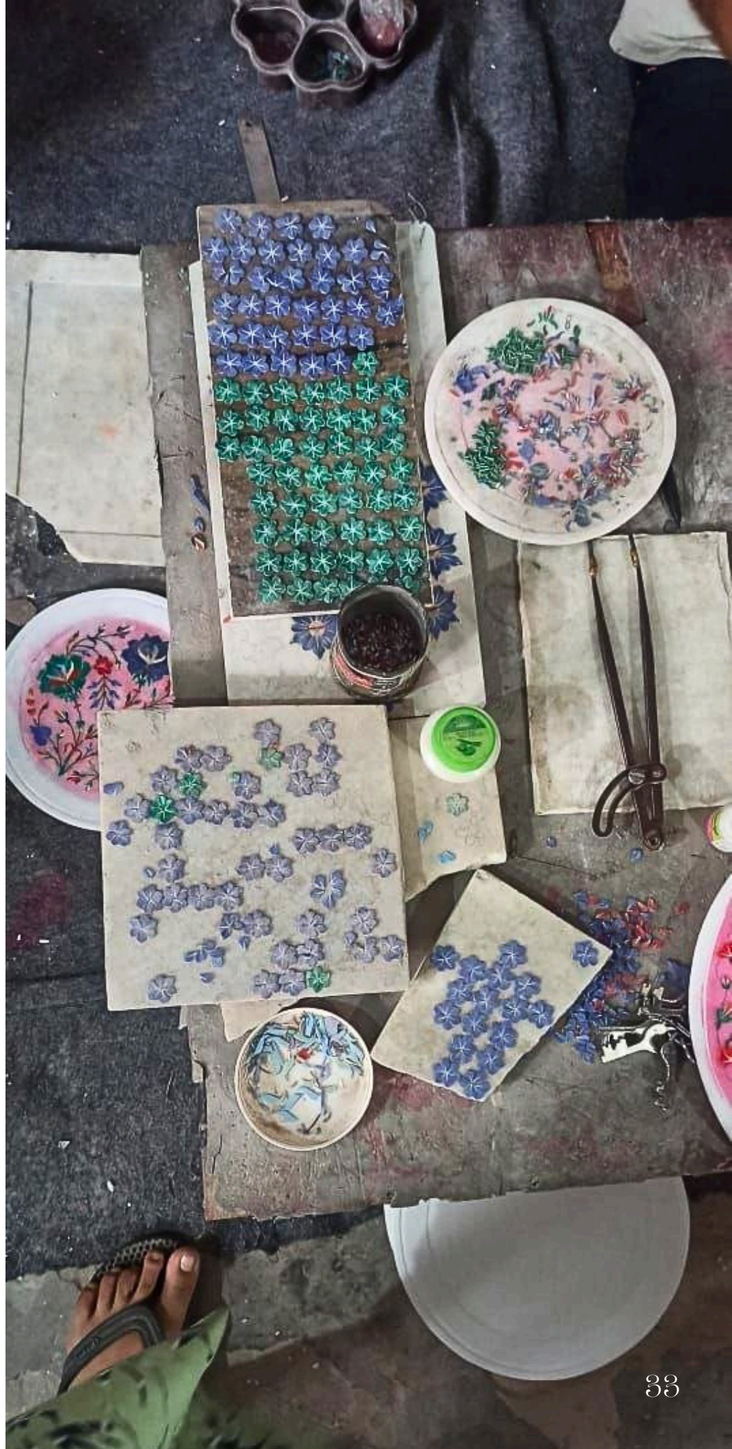


Mrinal Das

Mrinal's multidisciplinary practice spans painting and mixed media, engaging with the intersections of memory, lived experience, and the rapidly transforming landscapes of agrarian communities.

Raised in Bhattapara, a village near Mojoli (Rani Chapari), a river island in Assam, Das draws deeply from the rhythms of rural life and the farming communities that shaped his upbringing. The resilience, struggles, and collective wisdom of this environment continue to inform his artistic language. Childhood memories of conversations shared in courtyards, folktales, ghost stories, encounters with wild animals, and expressions of attachment to the land have become central to his visual imagination. Through his practice, he reflects not only on the beauty of these landscapes but also on their fragility and the quiet sorrow embedded within processes of ecological and social change. Although currently based in Delhi, Das remains closely connected to his village and its evolving realities. His works often emerge from direct observation and personal reflection, positioning him simultaneously as witness, participant, and archivist. Working primarily through realistic depictions layered with abstraction and symbolism, he explores themes of temporality, displacement, memory, and survival. Visual language becomes a means of articulating emotions and experiences that often resist verbal expression.

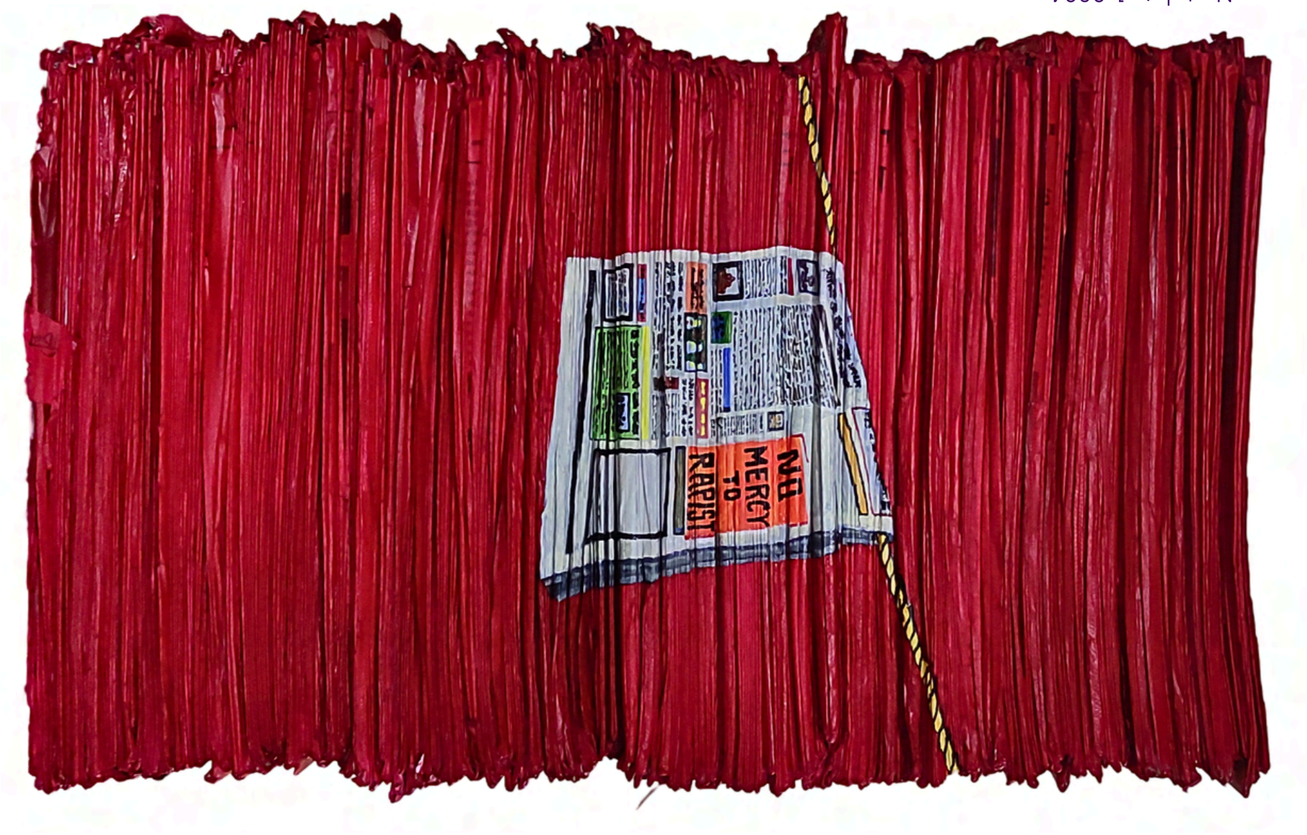
A significant part of his ongoing practice is Project Mojoli, an evolving body of work documenting the disappearing histories, agricultural practices, and changing landscapes of Mojoli island. Through field visits, oral histories, sketches, and collected materials, Das attempts to preserve the cultural memory of communities increasingly threatened by ecological instability and economic transformation. His works frequently incorporate found and symbolic materials such as newspapers, handwritten letters, plastic packets, matchsticks, and cloth flex. These elements carry both personal and collective associations, functioning as metaphors for fragility, endurance, and remembrance. By weaving such materials into his compositions, Das constructs layered visual narratives that exist between documentation and emotional reflection.

At its core, his practice is an act of preservation and care — an effort to hold space for vulnerable communities, fading traditions, and endangered landscapes. Each work operates simultaneously as personal testimony and collective archive, ensuring that stories at risk of disappearance continue to remain visible and remembered.

Bound by Sleep Paralysis, 2025
Water colour, graphite and pictogram on paper.

Twelve Yellow Stories, 2023
Acrylic on canvas.

খাবনি / খাবেনী (Khābeni), 2026
Water colour and Nora (rice straw) on paper.



Nostalgia 1, 2024
Acrylic color on stacked newspaper.

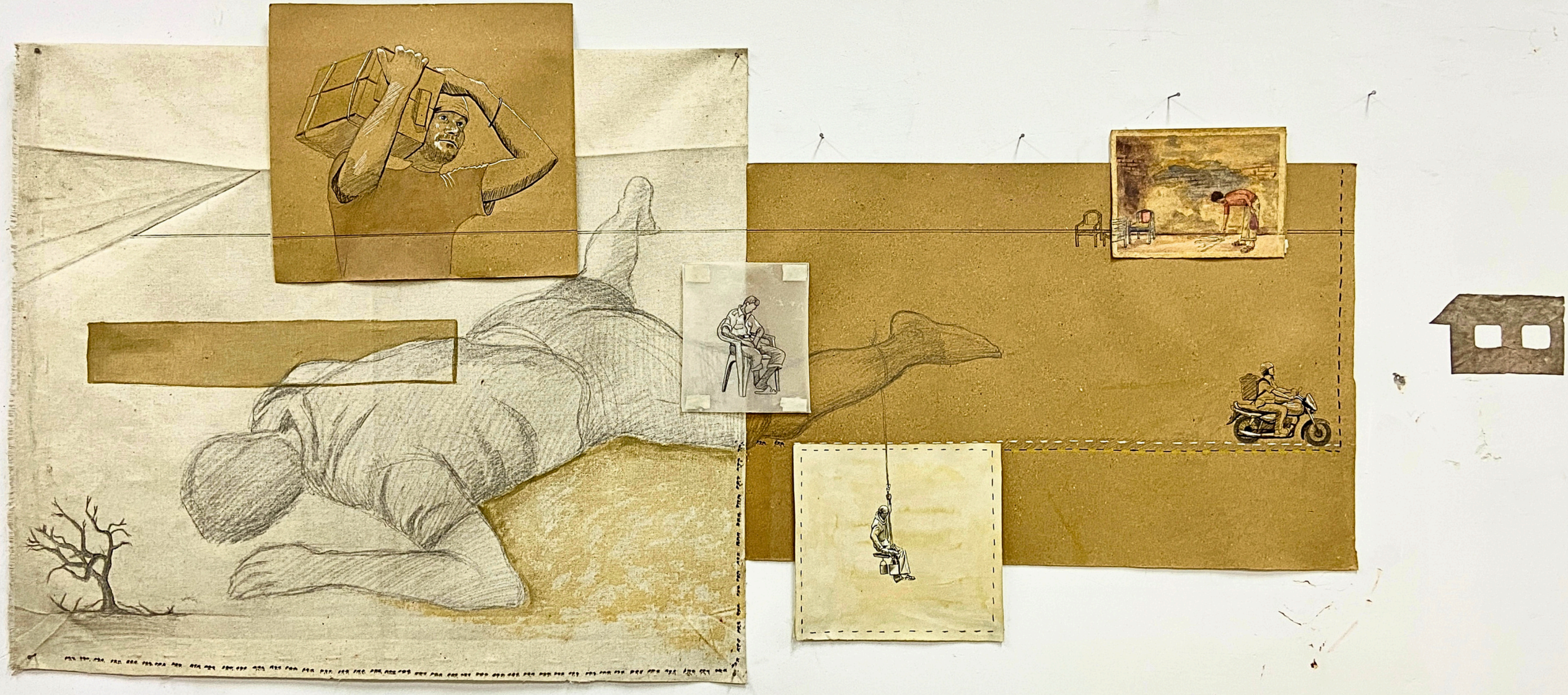
Fractured Dreams, 2025
Mix media (wood, ink, steel pins).

Om Kumar

Om's practice spans painting and mixed media, focusing on the emotional and physical struggles of men within contemporary Indian society.

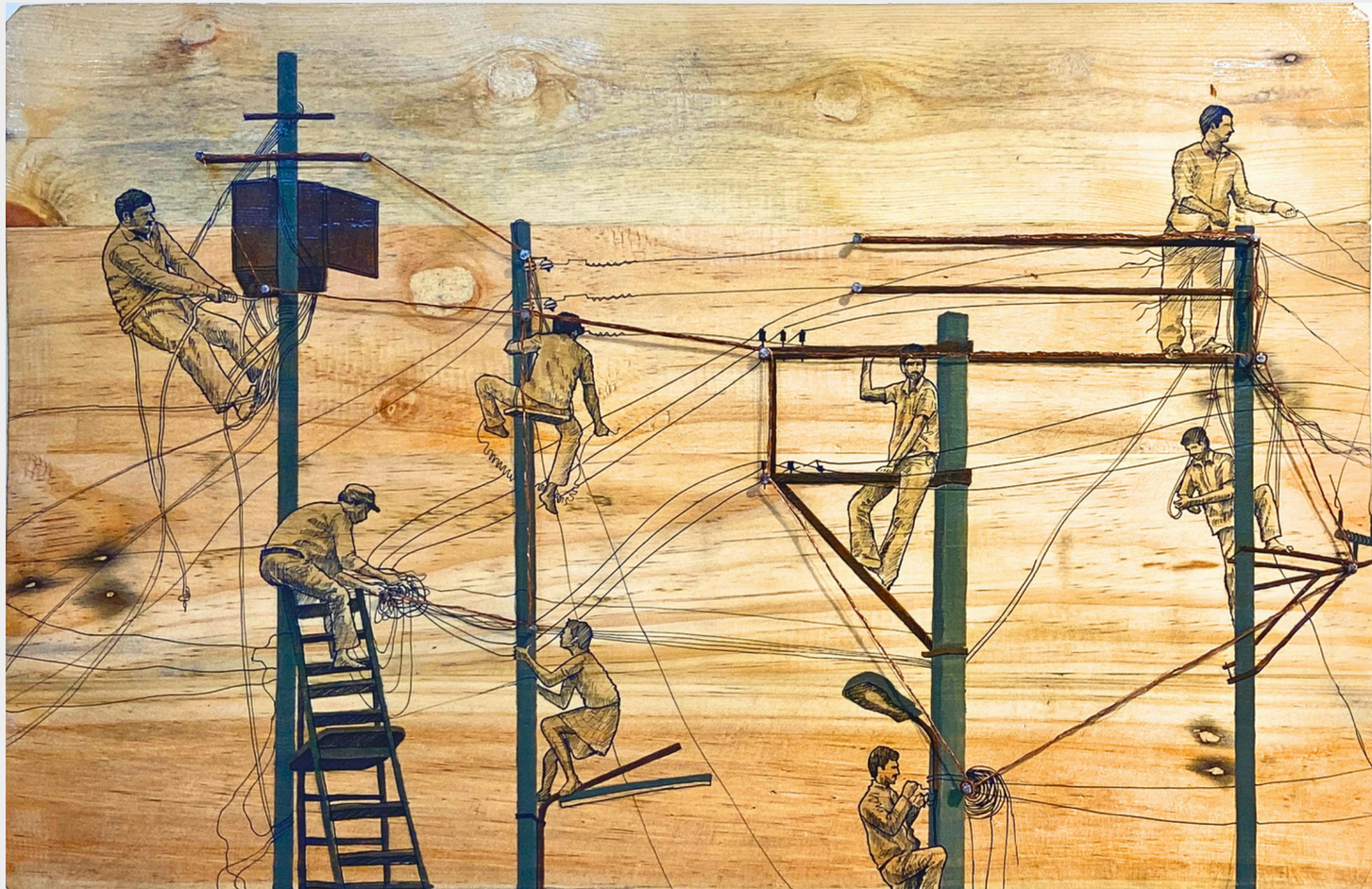
Kumar's work uses the male figure as a symbol of silent sacrifice, responsibility, and emotional endurance. Through his drawings and paintings, he examines the pressures placed upon men within social and familial structures, highlighting the hidden vulnerabilities and unspoken emotions often suppressed under expectations of strength and resilience. His practice seeks to give visibility to the experiences of ordinary men whose labour, dedication, and emotional struggles frequently remain overlooked. A recurring theme in his recent work is the figure of electricians navigating tangled wires and electric poles. These figures function not only as representations of a profession but also as metaphors for confusion, risk, pressure, and the complexities of everyday life. Working with off-white handmade paper, micro pens, and watercolour, Kumar maintains a raw and tactile visual language. His predominantly earthy brown palette evokes soil, labour, and lived reality, while the rough textures of his materials reinforce the emotional weight carried by his subjects. Rather than portraying idealized or heroic figures, Kumar depicts men as tired, contemplative, and absorbed in routine labour. Through body language, gestures, and facial expressions, he conveys themes of silence, exhaustion, aspiration, and psychological burden. His works invite viewers to engage empathetically with these figures and reflect upon the invisible emotional realities embedded within everyday masculinity.

Alongside his studio practice, Kumar also works as a live portrait and caricature artist at public events. This direct engagement with people informs his understanding of gesture, expression, and human behaviour, sharpening the observational qualities central to his work. At its core, Kumar's practice is a reflection on lived reality rather than idealized representation. Through his art, he creates a visual tribute to the common man, foregrounding the emotional depth, vulnerability, and unseen struggles that shape contemporary life.



The weight of tomorrow, 2025
Mix media (wood, paper, ink, graphite, thread, tape, water colour, pins).

Silent Burden, 2025
Acrylic and pen on canvas.



Threads of Survival, 2025
Mix media (wood, paper, ink, metal wire).

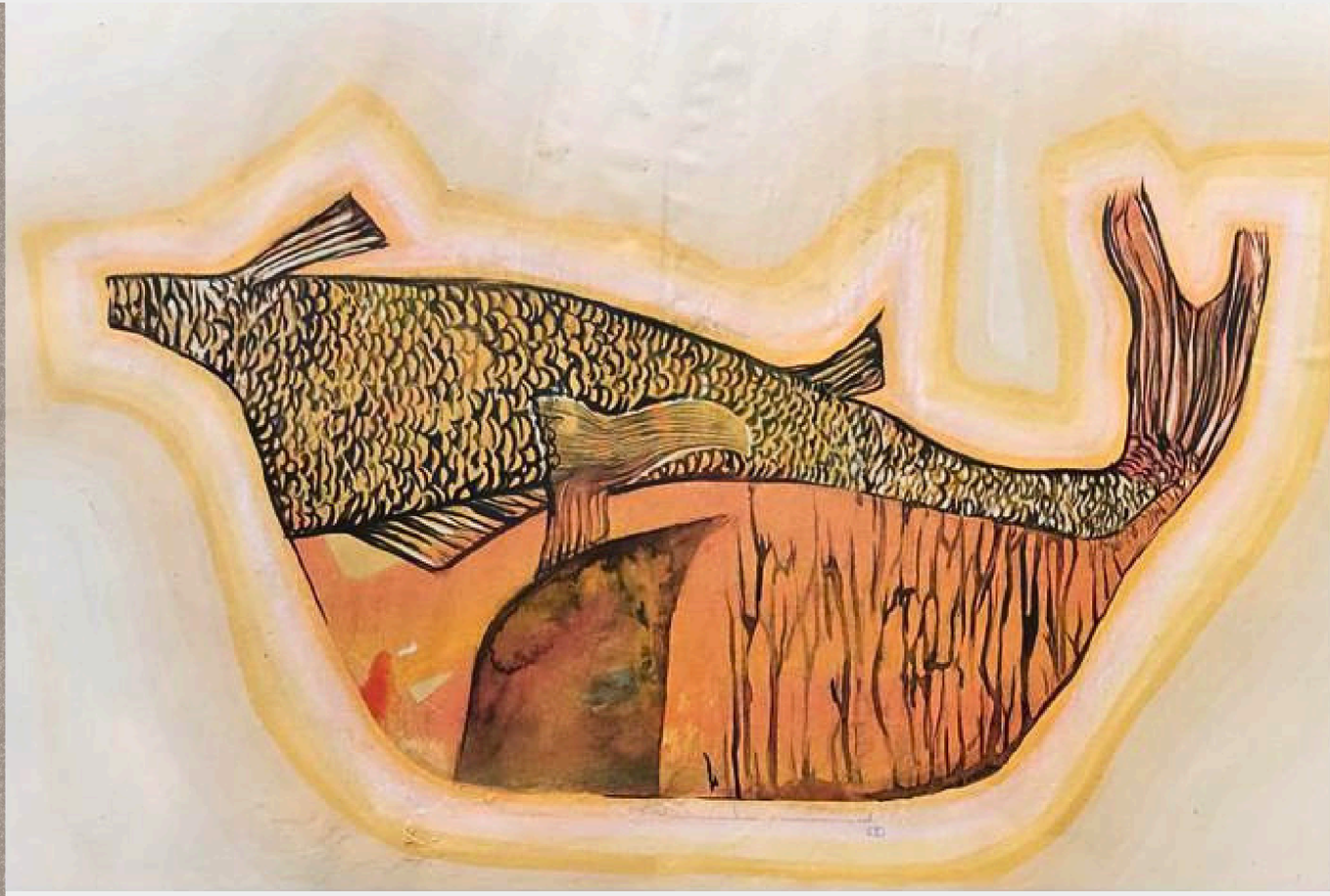
Prasoon Chandra Poddar

Prasoon's practice explores the polarity of human vision and the coexistence of opposites within contemporary life and culture while working across painting, installation, and mixed media.

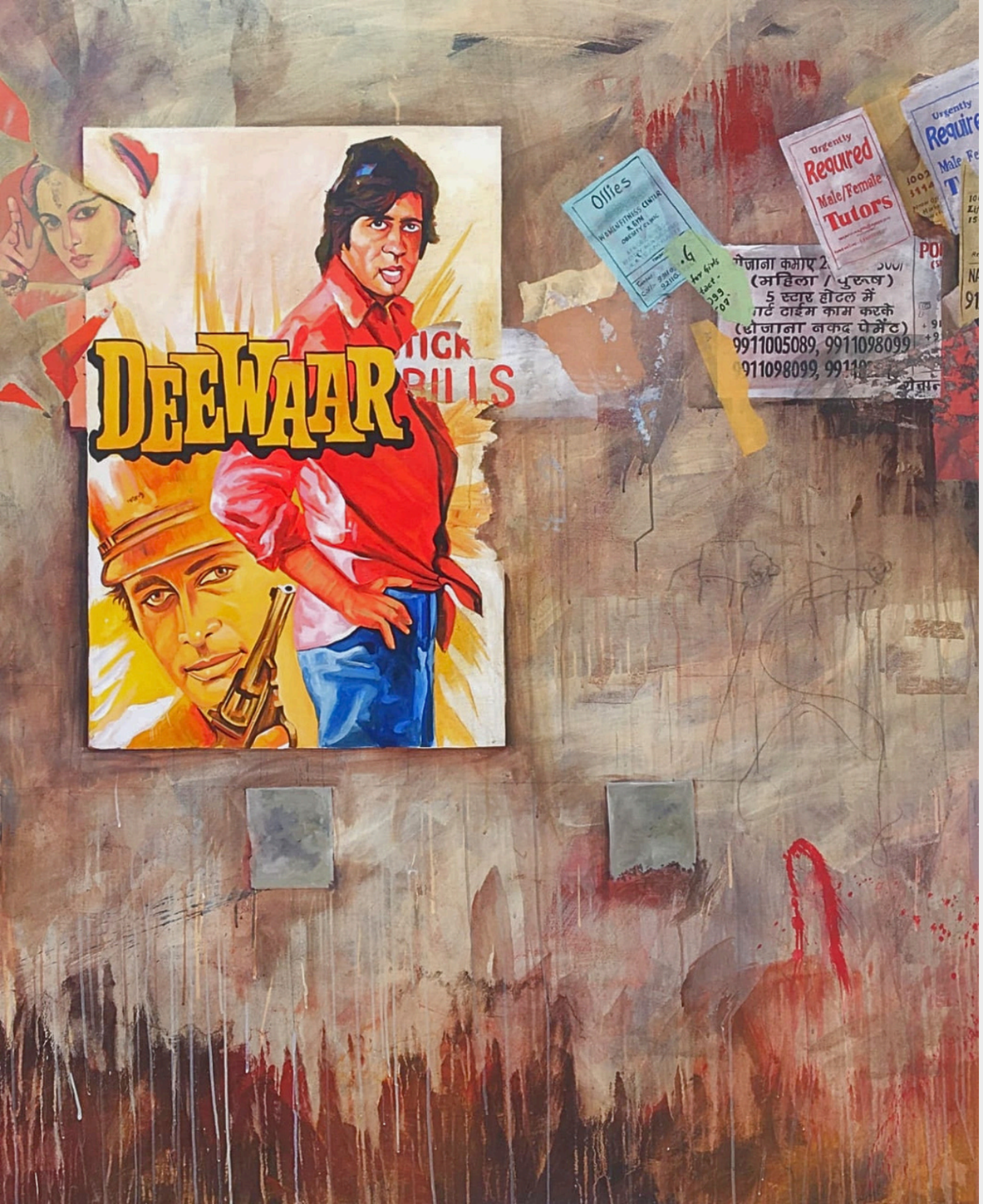
Central to his work is the idea that perception is never singular or fixed. Poddar examines how images, objects, and environments can simultaneously embody conflicting meanings depending on one's social, emotional, or physical position. Through layered visual narratives, he investigates tensions between beauty and ugliness, utility and waste, construction and destruction, encouraging viewers to reconsider conventional ways of seeing and interpreting the world around them.

Poddar's artistic practice consistently engages with contradiction, coexistence, and transformation. Through diverse materials and visual languages, he creates works that challenge fixed perspectives and open spaces for critical reflection on culture, memory, ecology, and human behaviour. His work ultimately invites viewers to confront the unstable and multifaceted realities that shape contemporary existence.

In the Shape Shifter, Poddar uses the silhouette of fish forms containing human legs and limbs, referencing evolutionary narratives and humanity's transformation over time. These hybrid figures function as metaphors for adaptation, transition, and the blurred boundaries between species, history, and identity.



Shape Shifter, 2025
Mix media on paper

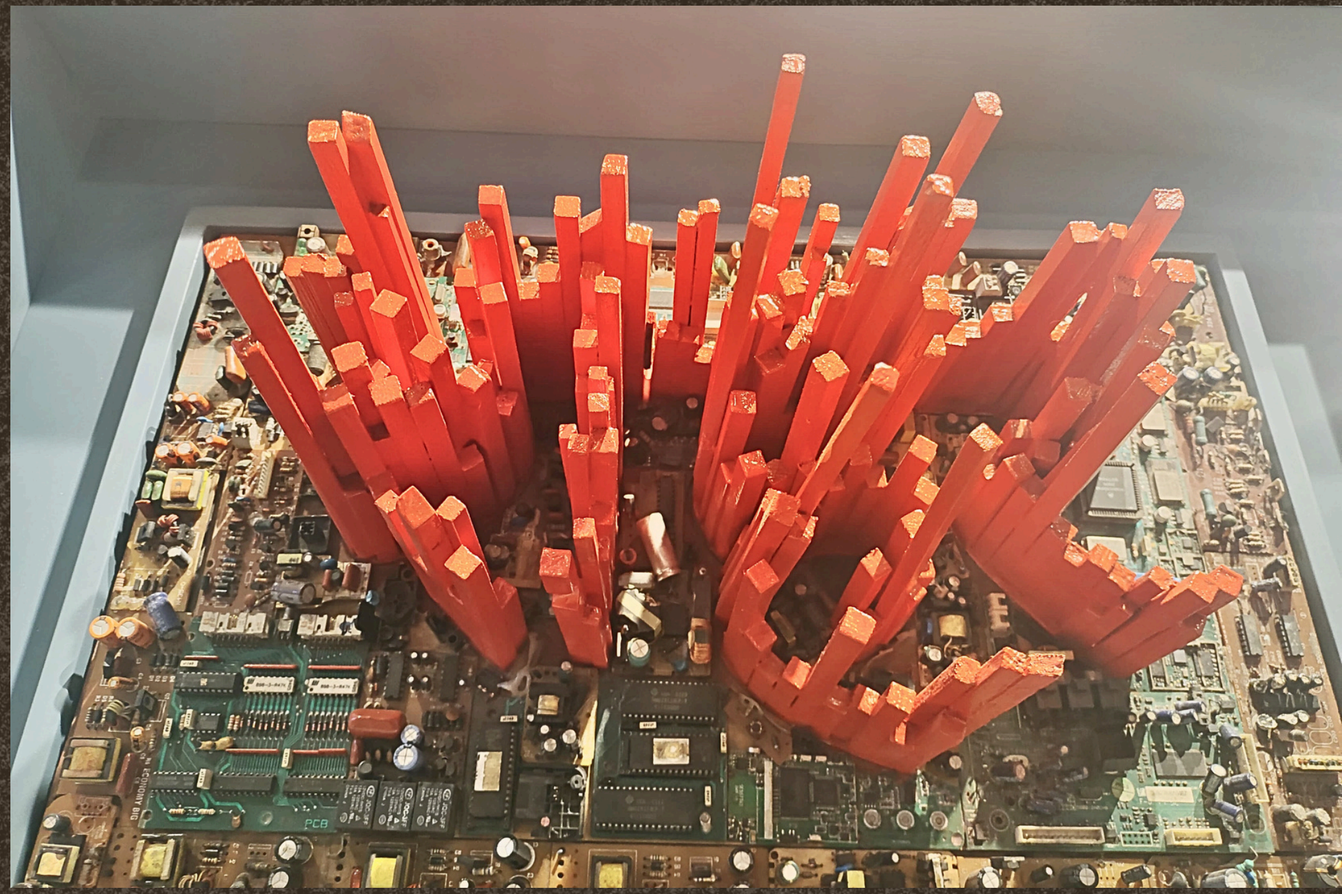


His multidisciplinary practice reflects the shifting and often contradictory nature of contemporary culture. In his Bollywood Poster series, Poddar revisits the tradition of hand-painted cinema posters once created by illustrators before the rise of digital printing and motion graphics. Through these works, he not only archives a disappearing visual culture but also reflects on changing modes of image production and consumption within popular media.

Deewaar, 2023
Acrylic on canvas.

Silence Wall, 2023
Acrylic on canvas.

His installation Sahar further expands these concerns through the use of electronic waste, examining the environmental consequences of technological consumerism. By transforming discarded materials into sculptural forms, Poddar comments on the rapidly expanding culture of consumption and its impact on ecological systems. The work reflects his broader interest in how contemporary societies construct progress while simultaneously contributing to destruction and environmental imbalance.



Shahar (The City), 2021
Electronic motherboard, wood & pencil.

Rahul Wahi

Rahul's practice primarily engages with zines, collage, and photomontage, drawing from his lived experiences and the visual language of chronic illness.

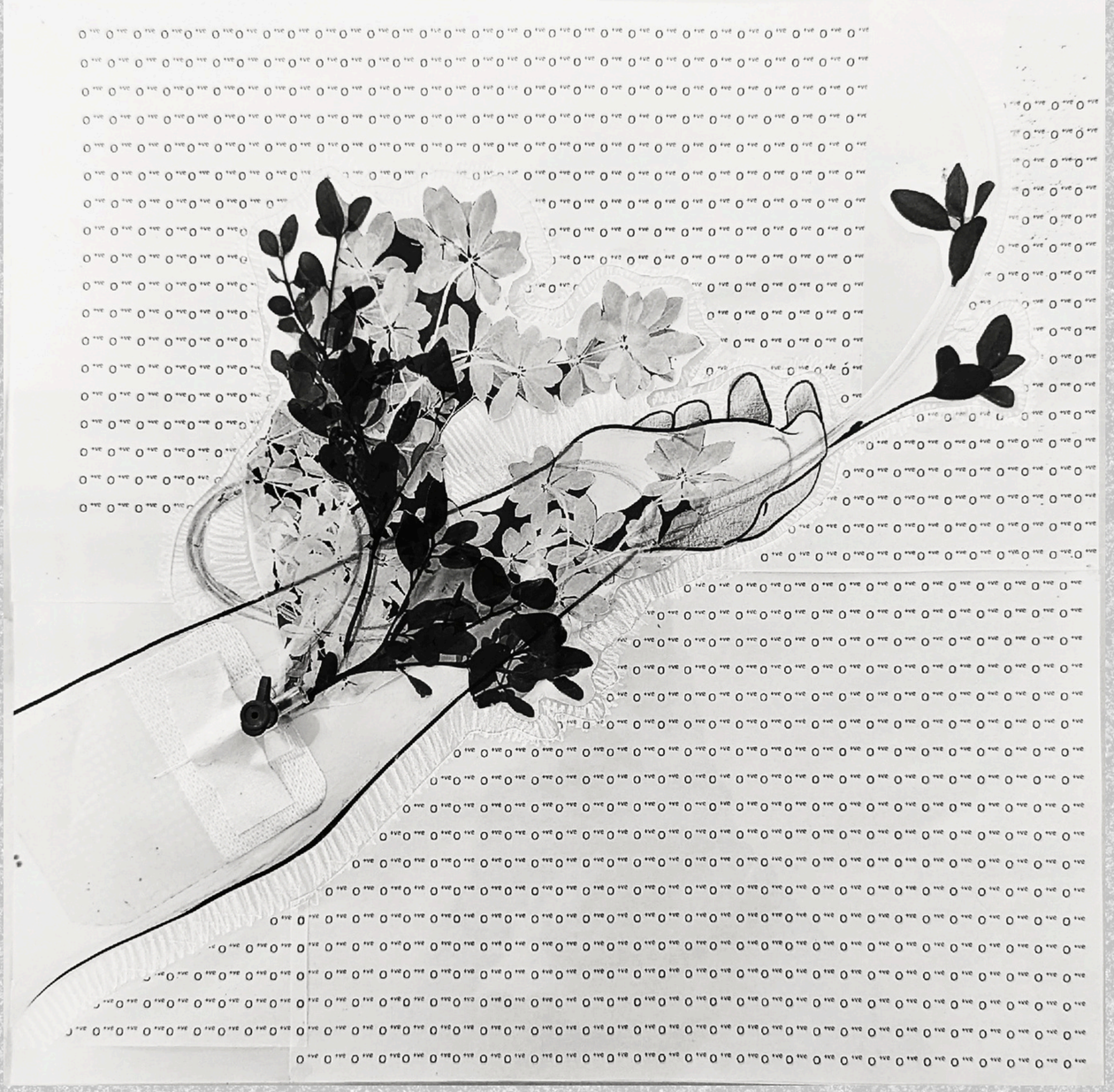
Wahi's work reconfigures materials and imagery associated with medical systems — including blood bags, prescriptions, medicines, diagnostic reports, and clinical records — transforming them into layered artistic compositions that reflect the realities of a medically sustained body. Objects commonly associated with vulnerability and discomfort become tools for exploring identity, resilience, visibility, and care. Through fragmented visual narratives, his practice examines how illness shapes both the physical body and emotional experience. Working extensively with collage and photomontage, Wahi creates dense compositions that resemble medical archives and bureaucratic documentation. Repeated layers of prescriptions, reports, and handwritten notes mirror the repetitive processes of examination, recording, and treatment that define life within medical systems. The zine format becomes particularly significant within his practice, allowing him to assemble personal memories and clinical fragments into intimate sequential narratives.

Deeply autobiographical in nature, Wahi's work reflects the emotional realities of living with Thalassemia Major and navigating a life structured around continuous treatment and medical dependency. His practice addresses experiences of pain, endurance, uncertainty, and acceptance while also confronting the exclusion often encountered within institutional and artistic spaces. Through his work, he challenges the marginalization of narratives surrounding illness and disability, insisting upon their visibility within contemporary art discourse.

Wahi's practice ultimately transforms the clinical archive of illness into a language of reflection and awareness. Through fragmented medical narratives, he seeks to shift perceptions of illness from something hidden or regretted to something acknowledged, visible, and understood — opening conversations around bodies that survive, adapt, and continuously negotiate their place within systems of care and society.

Where does it end and I begin ?, 2024
Mix media on paper.

Khudpe banao Zine (Part of Life in Layers Project), 2023
Mix media on paper.



How much of me is truly mine ?, 2023
Mix media on paper.

Do the chelators pull out just the iron or sorrow too ?, 2023
Mix media on paper.

Two recurring conceptual inquiries within his practice are articulated through works such as Do the Chelators Pull Out Just the Iron or Sorrow Too? and How Much of Me Is Truly Mine?. These works reflect on the psychological and existential dimensions of chronic treatment. The first draws from the experience of iron chelation therapy required after regular blood transfusions, questioning whether emotional suffering can also be extracted alongside physical toxicity. The second examines questions of bodily identity and selfhood, considering how repeated transfusions from anonymous donors complicate notions of ownership, autonomy, and the idea of the "self."

Shattered gaze, 2024
Graphite and acrylic on paper.

Rajnesh Kumar

Rajnesh's artistic practice is deeply rooted in the exploration of the human condition, combining psychological inquiry with technical precision to create works that are both intimate and universal.

Alongside formal education, Kumar has expanded his practice through independent study, online courses, and private mentorships, refining his draftsmanship and oil-painting techniques. His engagement with classical traditions, particularly through his experience at the Florence Academy of Art, continues to inform his contemporary visual language. Influenced by artists such as Caravaggio, Andrew Wyeth, Bikash Bhattacharjee, and Frank Stella, Kumar merges traditional realism with modern sensibilities, employing dramatic light, textured surfaces, and unconventional colour palettes to evoke emotional intensity and introspection.

In recent years, his work has focused on themes of fragmentation, existential suffocation, and emotional disorientation within a world shaped by excess choice and digital noise. Recurring motifs of distorted and intertwined multi-figure compositions symbolize confusion, entanglement, and the search for authenticity amidst contemporary alienation. Through these fractured forms, Kumar examines the instability of identity and the psychological tensions of modern existence.

His ongoing Mask Series further explores the idea of performative identity and the multiple roles individuals adopt within personal and social relationships. These works question the divide between public persona and private self, asking how individuals reconcile the identities they present outwardly with the emotions and vulnerabilities they conceal.

Currently, Kumar is expanding the scale and materiality of his practice by incorporating mixed media, sculpture, and installation alongside painting. This evolution reflects his continued engagement with the complexities of human emotion and identity — fragmented yet persistently seeking unity, connection, and self-understanding.

Echoes of Presence, 2024
Oil on canvas.

Mask, 2024
Oil on canvas.

Mirror of the soul, 2024
Oil on canvas.

Rehumanising the Boy

Affective Labour, Boyhood, and the Lingering Burdens of Gender Justice

by Ankit Banerjee

If anyone has witnessed a newborn baby just hours out of the womb, they will agree with me when I say that it is how we raise them that will shape the child's being. Most of us are born with scripts that are inherently stacked against us. Many would argue that men are disproportionately blessed. They are largely right, but in doing so they are reifying an unjust society where men are upheld while overlooking the facets of patriarchy that spare no one and lead to society's destruction (Lorde, 1984; Bannerji, 2016).

Yet when boys or men express vulnerability, seek alternative ways of being, or refuse what they have inherited, the response is often suspicion, ridicule, or active punishment. The boy who feels is 'too sensitive.' The man who questions dominance is treated as a threat to hegemonic order. Across institutions, communities, and even progressive spaces, the behaviours that might signal transformation are routinely dismissed or pathologised, as if the act of feeling were itself a form of deviance.

Despite being raised in a patriarchal system, there resides hope among those who relentlessly hold on to their belief that 'men have the will to change' (hooks, 2003). Every day, reports of violence, gang rapes, dowry deaths, and domestic abuse heighten the urgency of working with men for gender transformation. While these violence are mostly perpetrated by men against women and girls (Burrell, 2018; Casey et al., 2013), to go beyond a hostile nail and hammer situation, practitioners argue for a more proactive and pragmatic approach: an analysis of men who work alongside women to reverse inherited privileges and envision alternative imaginations, without negating women's everyday struggles (Dworkin and Barker, 2019; Edström et al., 2015).

This piece draws on my study, Tangled Masculinities (2025), which explores the affective labour involved in this work (Hochschild, 1983; Reeser and Gottzén, 2018), and the toll of dismantling patriarchy from within. The emotional weight of male engagement is a contested terrain that both the facilitators and their participants inhabit. The burdens are braided, each shaped by the same architecture of power that makes the situation hopeful and unbearable at the same time.

"Catch him! Snatch him! Hold him! Scold him! Pounce him! Trounce him! Pick him up and bounce him!" — Lionel Bart, Oliver! (1960)

Image courtesy: Ankit Banerjee

"Growing up in India you are taught, 'Respect your elders and respect women.' Meaning, only little boys can be disrespected!" — Comedian Abhishek Upmanyu (2017)

The research is informed by conversations with fourteen practitioners across India and the UK, alongside organisational document analysis and an ethnographic placement. The voices quoted below – facilitators, fieldworkers, and programme officers drawn from this group – enter classrooms, community halls, and workshops to hold difficult conversations with men and boys about gender, violence, and power. They navigate backlash and hostility, while the boys and men they work with risk social punishment for questioning what they have been taught.

Masculinity is not a neat box that one grows into, but a knot of expectations, silences, push back, and imposed patterns that entangle bodies and relationships across generations. Hence, engaging men in the pursuit of gender justice, is like carrying water in cupped hands in a parched landscape. Arduous, confusing, and not always rewarding. Drawing on the feminist epistemology of 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1988), my own situatedness in this inquiry extends beyond the fieldwork. As a gender queer visual practitioner who has navigated masculinity through embodied practice, through play and vulnerability rather than avoidance, I arrived at these questions from within the knot. The costs of non-conformity to me are lived realities. Thus, the attempt is to listen to the field in multiple registers: intellectually, emotionally, and structurally, attending to hesitation and deflection.

Structure alone cannot account for how masculinity is lived. Boys' realities are shaped by gender norms and the intersecting forces of poverty, violence, and institutional betrayal that escalate entrenched gendered relations. As a fieldworker recounts, "A 7–8-year-old boy tells me: my mother committed suicide, my father is an alcoholic, I take care of my sister. What are you talking about?" (Veyan). We see here how structural poverty, inter-generational trauma, and financial precarity are inseparable from how boys negotiate gender expectations. When there's no food on the table, discussions about gender are far beyond reach.

This is where the decoupling of material needs and the infrastructure within which gender is lived fuels affective tension. "From childhood, we are taught the boy must earn. He is responsible for the family. That is the script" (Yuvraj). This dehumanised socialisation of men as breadwinners leaves no room for self-hood outside the provisional role. The conflict between economic survival and emotional personhood becomes the very site where vulnerability must be held rather than denied. Such interventions put the burden of change on young boys who are already disadvantaged.

Image courtesy: Ankit Banerjee

Therefore, practitioners vitalise the need to treat young boys as feeling subjects, not as threats. "Going into a classroom space and interacting with just boys... you realise, oh my God, these are people too" (Nayra). These moments of vulnerability rehumanise boys as complex emotional beings. As the facilitator elaborates, "I came into the work with this notion... that gender work with men is about violence prevention... It took me a whole year to unlearn that," while also recognising, "We're trying to create a certain kind of emotional experience... fully conscious that the people who beat up these boys are sitting in the next room" (Nayra).

The friction between the individual and the institution is critical. "We had principals telling us, this is spoiling our boys. It's against our culture. Why are you talking about these things in school?" (Yuvraj). Under the pretext that such work damages cultural values and the reputation of boys, interventions are often blocked. While working with boys in schools, facilitators are mindful that the very institutions meant to nurture boys are also those that enact violence on them, where boys experience more physical punishment in schools than girls (Kedia et al., 2024; Schaay et al., (2025).

As one interlocutor puts it directly: "Do you want to be a strong father or a loving father?" (Bivya). Such questions cut through layers of identity, provision, and dominance that destabilise inherited codes and provoke vulnerability. They open possibilities for care beyond strength. This shifts the conversation from shaming boys for not meeting gender ideals and instead targets the ideals themselves. As another facilitator rightly suggests, "Make men uncomfortable with stereotypes, not with their failures to achieve them" (Liyan). The work unsettles the norm itself, allowing accountability to emerge while bypassing defensiveness. Yet, the work of unsettling carries its own weight.

Facilitators must constantly recalibrate and remain reflexive in rooms thick with suspicion, defensiveness, and hostility, absorbing humiliation, anger, and grief in real time. The facilitator's body becomes a site that must carry and redistribute affect while minimising the repair of their wounds (Ahmed, 2004; Keddie and Bartel, 2021). The burnout also stems from moving from one project to another without any time for debriefing or reflection. As many programme officers and fieldworkers describe, "We finish one cycle, and the next one starts immediately. No pause, no processing, just move on" (Stuti). As a facilitator explains, "We walk out of the space, but the boys have to stay there," adding, "You can have the best workshop, but if he goes home to a violent house, it's undone in an hour" (Nayra).

On the participants' end, boys who question harmful gender norms become targets of violence. "In our society, boys who are sensitive are considered weak. They will get called names, bullied, and told they are not real men." Furthermore, "If you join these sessions, people will say you've become soft. They won't trust you to be 'a man' anymore" (Bivya). The stigma from peers, family, and community reinforces the gendered order these programmes aim to dismantle.

The burdens on both sides are symptomatic outcomes of the same architecture that structures both the facilitator's exhaustion and the participant's risk. As the fieldworker reflects, "The burden of feminist work... is not something everyone should bear. But we're choosing to bear it" (Nayra). This is situated accountability: not moral purity, but a direct willingness to endure conflict and vulnerability as part of the same labour.

Image courtesy: Ankit Banerjee

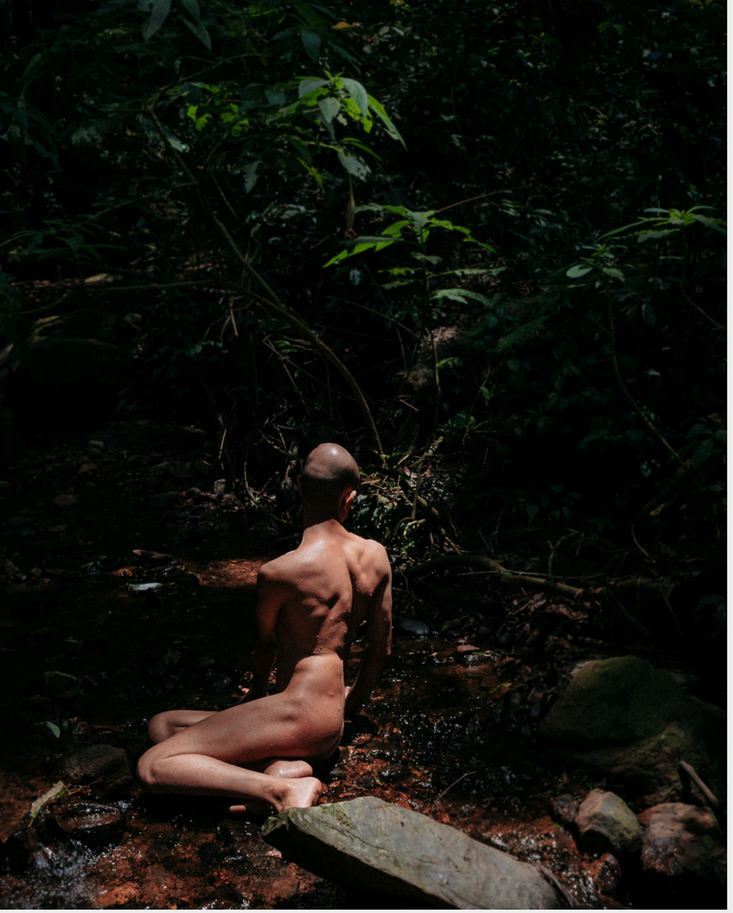


Image courtesy: Ankit Banerjee

Author's Note: "Captionless photographs accompanying this essay are drawn from my ongoing exploration through self-portraits in open landscapes. These photographs engage with vulnerability and the refusal of shame. Not illustrative, but in a parallel register they evoke the multiplicity of masculine expression, asking what it means to exist as a living being, not merely as a gendered body. This piece is drawn from my MA dissertation, 'Tangled Masculinities: Affective Labour of Male Engagement in Gender Justice,' completed at the University of Sussex, School of Global Studies (2024/25). All names mentioned in the piece are pseudonyms."

Without ongoing scaffolding, not only are one-off interventions insufficient, but without a structural and political shift, change at an individual level is a drop in the ocean. Engaging men in gender justice means dismantling patriarchal structures that bind everyone. This means centring affective labour as political evidence rather than collateral damage. Emotions are not incidental here. They are intrinsically linked to our value systems, and when emotions are jarred, it is a signal that our values have been tampered with. This is the endurance principle: privileging the slow, uncomfortable holding of contradictions over the lure of quick wins or premature closure.

Patriarchy does not end with one programme, one boy, one facilitator, or one thesis. What I offer instead are fragments: glimpses of endurance, traces of exhaustion, questions that outlive the page. When a boy is seen as more than a threat, or a facilitator refuses saviourhood, something holds. To stay with the trouble of this work is to accept that it spills, like water in cupped hands, even as we carry it.

The work is never done. And perhaps that is the point.

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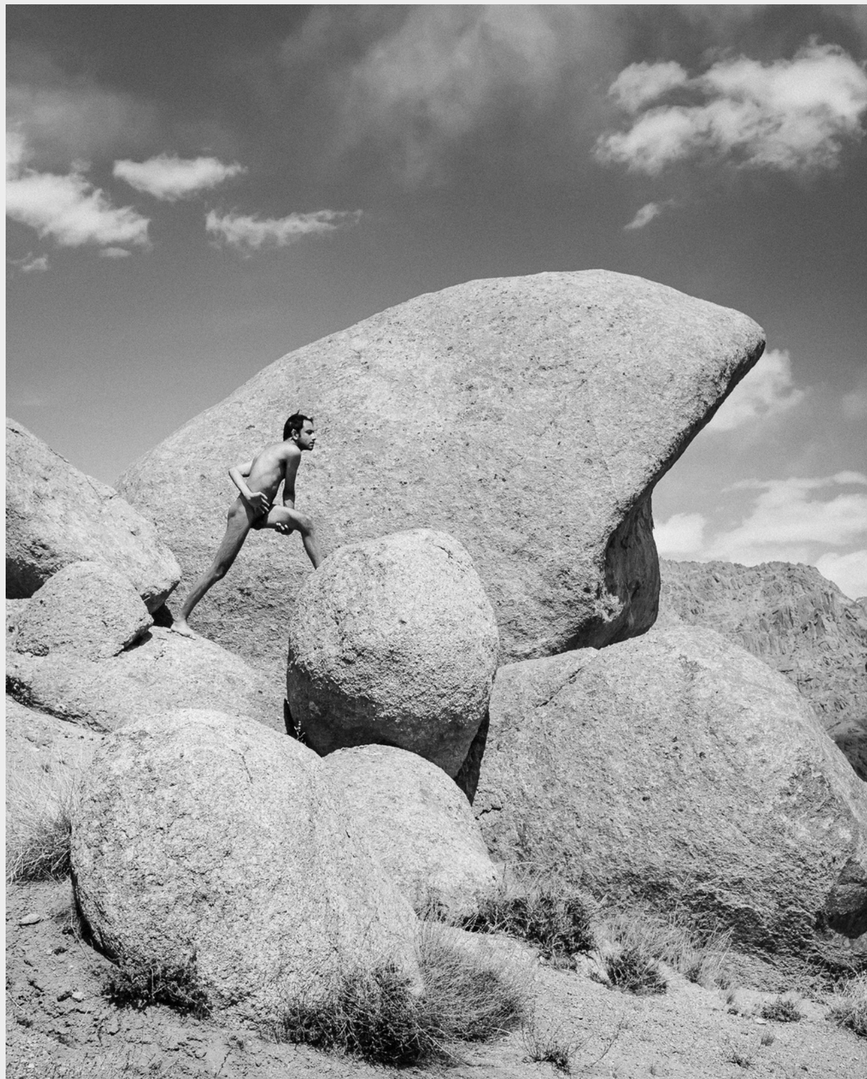


Sahil Kumar

Sahil's practice explores themes of mental health, healing, care, and resilience through drawing, installation, and mixed media experimentation.

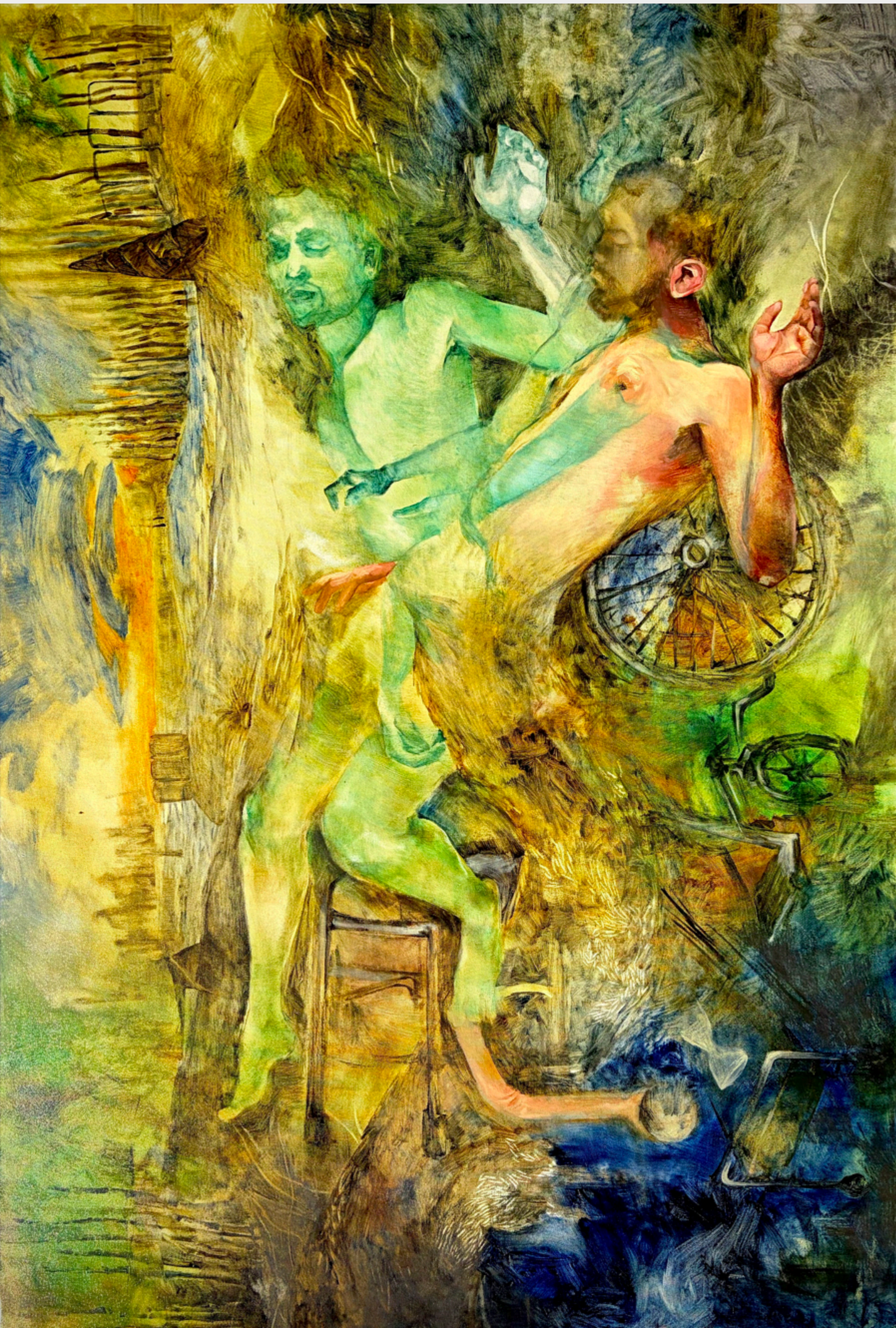
Drawing remains central to Kumar's practice, though his work has gradually expanded into installations incorporating found objects, medical materials, sensors, light, and sound. His artistic inquiry emerges from an ongoing exploration of vulnerability and the universal human desire to move beyond moments of physical and psychological limitation. Influenced by personal experiences, animals, moral narratives, and epics, his works navigate the fragile intersections between suffering, recovery, and transformation. A significant turning point in his practice emerged during an extended period of bed rest in an intensive care unit. Within the confined environment of the hospital, Kumar became deeply attentive to the rhythms of medical spaces, the sounds of machines, the presence of fear and hope, the gestures of care, and the slow temporality of healing. These observations transformed ordinary medical instruments into symbolic extensions of the body. Over time, he began incorporating hospital materials and found objects into his work, reimagining them as sculptural metaphors for endurance, fragility, and survival.

Returning home, Kumar found continuities between these experiences and the quiet acts of care embodied by his mother. Through drawings and paintings, he portrays everyday gestures of nurturing and sacrifice, positioning care itself as a form of resilience and emotional strength.

Alongside these personal experiences, Kumar's practice is also shaped by repeated encounters with rejection within artistic and institutional systems. Formal refusals, unanswered applications, and the invisible labour surrounding creative practice have become important psychological and conceptual influences within his work. Rather than functioning solely as moments of exclusion, these experiences are treated as thresholds that reshape perception, persistence, and self-understanding. In this sense, rejection becomes another material within his practice, one that contributes to processes of reflection, endurance, and growth.

Can you hear us?, 2025
Mix media - image transfer, acrylic & ink on paper.

In Progress, 2025
Oil on canvas.



His use of charcoal reflects this conceptual fragility. As a medium that is unstable, erasable, and delicate, charcoal mirrors the emotional and psychological conditions explored in his work. Hospital imagery within his practice does not merely depict medical spaces but functions as a broader metaphor for contemporary life — a condition in which bodies, emotions, and systems continuously negotiate survival, care, limitation, and recovery. Through drawings, installations, and immersive environments, Kumar creates contemplative spaces where vulnerability and resilience coexist. His practice ultimately invites viewers to reflect upon their own experiences of healing, endurance, and the unseen emotional structures that shape human life.

Distance Between 99 and 100 - i & ii, 2025
Charcoal on Manjarpat cloth.

Rangeen Mukti, 2024

Saloni Tamsetwar

Saloni's practice is deeply rooted in South Asian cultural contexts and explores themes of identity, femininity, colour, memory, and liberation.

Tamsetwar's work examines how visual culture and fashion operate within systems of gendered expectation and social control. Through carefully constructed imagery and symbolic styling, she investigates the relationship between clothing, emotion, and personal agency, often focusing on how women negotiate visibility, silence, and self-expression within patriarchal structures.

Her project Rangeen Mukti functions as a visual meditation on colour, mourning, and liberation. Emerging from reflections on the cultural codes surrounding widowhood in South Asian societies, the series explores how grief is often accompanied by imposed visual restraint. In many traditions, widowhood is marked by the removal of colour, where white becomes both an aesthetic condition and a social instruction. Tamsetwar approaches these practices critically, examining how the denial of adornment and vibrancy reflects broader structures that regulate women's bodies, identities, and emotional expression.

The series portrays a widow dressed in a traditional white saree against the expansive backdrop of the ocean. While the garment remains unchanged, subtle interventions disrupt the visual language of mourning — vibrant pink and green bangles, kaner flowers woven into her braid, and lotus buds held gently in her hands. These elements become quiet acts of resistance, reclaiming joy, dignity, and individuality without overt confrontation.

Within the series, the ocean functions both as setting and metaphor: fluid, vast, and uncontainable. The figure's composed presence resists narratives of pity and submission, asserting visibility where absence and silence were historically expected. Through restraint and symbolism, Tamsetwar allows colour itself to emerge as a language of renewal and defiance.

Through Rangeen Mukti, she challenges the notion that loss must be accompanied by emotional and visual erasure. Her practice ultimately positions fashion and visual storytelling as tools of reclamation, restoring agency, choice, and vibrancy to identities historically confined by silence and social expectation.

Rangeen Mukti, 2024

Model: Mansi Vm
Photography: Yash Gholatkar
Makeup & Hair: Priyal Agrawal
Styling & Concept: Saloni Tamsetwar

The Mystic Lens: Silsilah on Screen

Reframing Sufi Tradition, the Nizamuddin Dargah, and Cinematic Devotion in Indian Cinema

by Yash Mishra

Indian cinema has long served as a site for the reimagining of religious traditions for mass public. Among these, Sufism occupies a particularly important place because it lends itself to cinema's visual and musical language. Its themes of longing, surrender, divine love, hospitality, and emotional openness are easily translated into filmic form. Yet this translation is never neutral. Cinema does not simply preserve Sufi tradition; it reorganises it for narrative, aesthetic, and commercial use. The result is a cinematic Sufism that is recognisable, emotionally effective, and widely circulated, but also selective and often politically safe. (Rizvi, 1978 ; Jaffer, 2012) This paper examines that process through the case of the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah in Delhi. The shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya is not only one of the most significant Sufi sites in South Asia but also a dense social and urban space where devotion, hospitality, memory, and community intersect. In Hindi cinema, it repeatedly appears as a space of refuge, healing, and moral crossing. Characters enter it when they are broken, lost, or in need of prayer. In such scenes, the shrine often becomes a symbolic zone where social divisions are temporarily suspended. The central argument of this paper is that Hindi cinema has popularised a sanitised, emotionally legible version of Sufism, especially through representations of the Nizamuddin Dargah and its associated musical traditions. This cinematic version foregrounds Qawwali, universal love, and inclusive spirituality, while often muting the traditions doctrinal, historical, and socio-political specificities. It also helps produce what may be called cinematic pilgrimage: contemporary shrine visitation shaped by films and songs more than by historical knowledge.

Dargah and the Chishti World

The Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah stands within a historically layered part of Delhi, near the Humayun's Tomb and Rahim's Tomb, and within a broader landscape of Mughal and pre- modern memorial space. Its significance lies not only in the memory of Nizamuddin Auliya, but in the institutional life of the Khanqah and Dargah. The shrine was historically organised around service, shelter, listening, and ethical proximity rather than state power. It remains a site where sanctity is lived socially rather than merely commemorated architecturally. Nizamuddin Auliya belonged to the Chishti order, a major Sufi Silsilah in South Asia associated with humility, accessibility, and devotion to the distressed. The Chishti tradition's relationship to music is especially important. It is often described as Bāʿsharʿa, meaning it remains within the framework of Sharia while also cultivating practices not always accepted by orthodox jurists. Music and poetry, especially in the form of Sama, became legitimate means of spiritual elevation within this world. But this should not be reduced to a simplistic opposition between "orthodox Islam" and "Sufi music." The point is not law versus no law; it is a historically negotiated relation between discipline and ecstasy. This tension matters because cinema tends to simplify it. In film, Sufi music often serves as a general marker of emotional depth, while the underlying theological debates fade into the background. The shrine becomes a symbol of universal peace rather than a historically rooted religious institution. That shift is crucial to understanding how Sufism is reconfigured for the screen.

Qawwali during the Vasant Panchami Festival at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, 2024. Image courtesy: Yash Mishra.

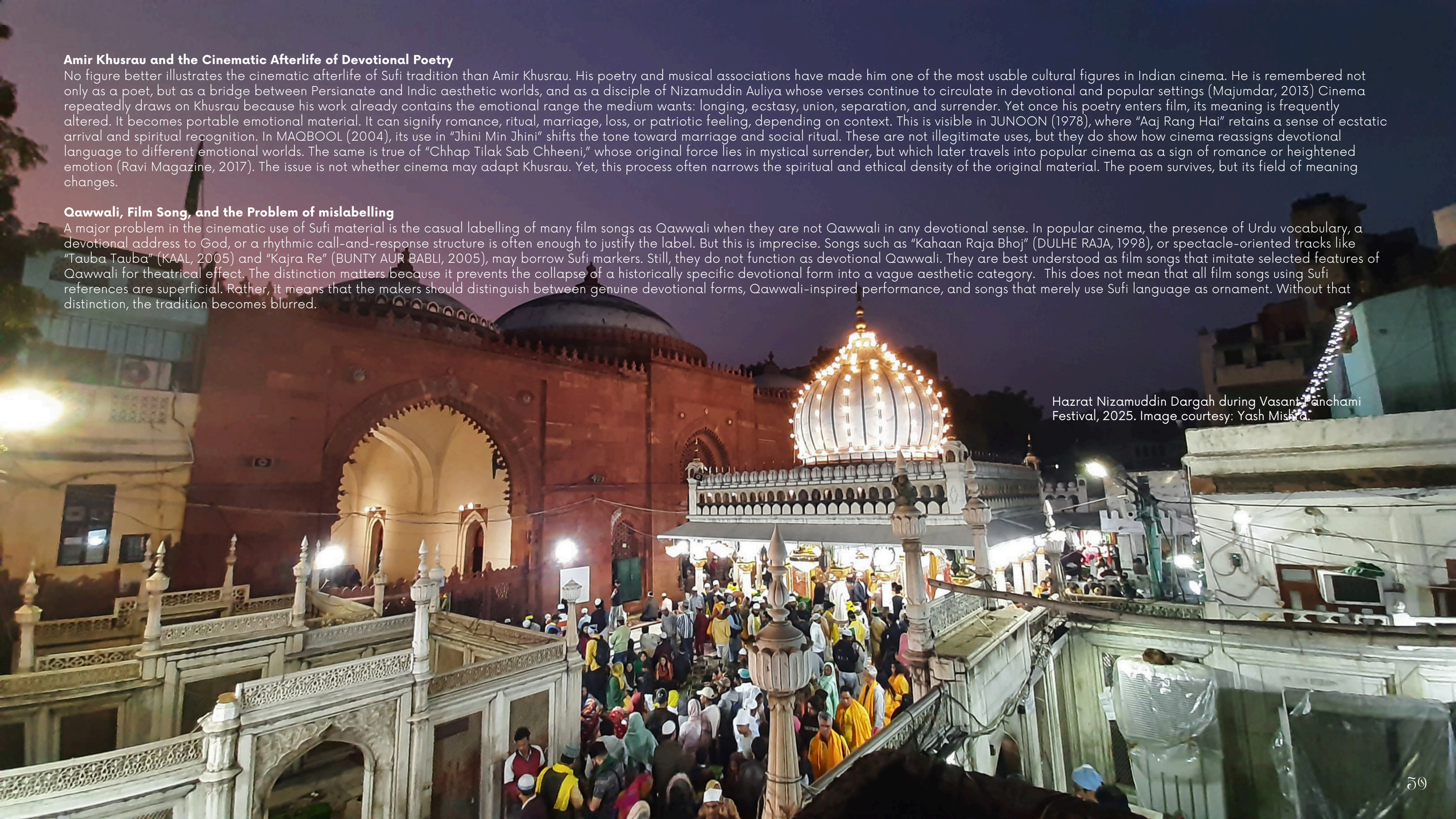
A Hindu devotee at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah. Image courtesy: Yash Mishra.

Amir Khusrau and the Cinematic Afterlife of Devotional Poetry

No figure better illustrates the cinematic afterlife of Sufi tradition than Amir Khusrau. His poetry and musical associations have made him one of the most usable cultural figures in Indian cinema. He is remembered not only as a poet, but as a bridge between Persianate and Indic aesthetic worlds, and as a disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya whose verses continue to circulate in devotional and popular settings (Majumdar, 2013) Cinema repeatedly draws on Khusrau because his work already contains the emotional range the medium wants: longing, ecstasy, union, separation, and surrender. Yet once his poetry enters film, its meaning is frequently altered. It becomes portable emotional material. It can signify romance, ritual, marriage, loss, or patriotic feeling, depending on context. This is visible in JUNOON (1978), where "Aaj Rang Hai" retains a sense of ecstatic arrival and spiritual recognition. In MAQBOOL (2004), its use in "Jhini Min Jhini" shifts the tone toward marriage and social ritual. These are not illegitimate uses, but they do show how cinema reassigns devotional language to different emotional worlds. The same is true of "Chhap Tilak Sab Chheeni," whose original force lies in mystical surrender, but which later travels into popular cinema as a sign of romance or heightened emotion (Ravi Magazine, 2017). The issue is not whether cinema may adapt Khusrau. Yet, this process often narrows the spiritual and ethical density of the original material. The poem survives, but its field of meaning changes.

Qawwali, Film Song, and the Problem of mislabelling

A major problem in the cinematic use of Sufi material is the casual labelling of many film songs as Qawwali when they are not Qawwali in any devotional sense. In popular cinema, the presence of Urdu vocabulary, a devotional address to God, or a rhythmic call-and-response structure is often enough to justify the label. But this is imprecise. Songs such as "Kahaan Raja Bhoj" (DULHE RAJA, 1998), or spectacle-oriented tracks like "Tauba Tauba" (KAAL, 2005) and "Kajra Re" (BUNTY AUR BABLI, 2005), may borrow Sufi markers. Still, they do not function as devotional Qawwali. They are best understood as film songs that imitate selected features of Qawwali for theatrical effect. The distinction matters because it prevents the collapse of a historically specific devotional form into a vague aesthetic category. This does not mean that all film songs using Sufi references are superficial. Rather, it means that the makers should distinguish between genuine devotional forms, Qawwali-inspired performance, and songs that merely use Sufi language as ornament. Without that distinction, the tradition becomes blurred.



Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah during Vasant Panchami Festival, 2025. Image courtesy: Yash Mishra.

Eid celebrations at Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah, 2026. Image courtesy: Yash Mishra.

The Dargah as a Cinematic Site of Refuge

One of the most persistent cinematic representations of the Dargah is as a space of refuge. Characters enter it in moments of crisis, separation, or confusion, and the shrine offers them a sense of emotional suspension. This is consistent with the ethical memory of Nizamuddin Auliya, whose spiritual practice is associated with feeding the poor, comforting the distressed, and treating service as a path to God. The Khanqah, in this sense, was not just a devotional site but a moral institution. AHISTA AHISTA (2006) showcases the Dargah as a place where one character prays on behalf of another. The sequence is modest, but significant because it reflects the shrine's traditional role as a space of intercession and service rather than spectacle. In BAJRANGI BHAIJAAN (2015), the Dargah acquires a broader humanitarian function. A Pakistani child and her mother enter the shrine in search of healing, and the film extends that moment into a trans-border narrative of care and return. "Bhar Do Jholi" intensifies the devotional atmosphere, but the film ultimately uses the shrine as part of a larger moral economy of compassion. The point is not simply religious devotion; it is a legible language of mercy that can travel across national boundaries. In ROCKSTAR (2011), the Dargah becomes one of the most famous cinematic shrine spaces in Hindi Cinema. Janardhan's entry into the shrine and the performance of "Kun Faaya Kun" create an atmosphere of surrender and artistic rebirth. The sequence has had a real afterlife: many young visitors now know the shrine first through the film and only secondarily through its history. Recent informal conversations at the shrine suggest that cinematic memory now plays a visible role in visitation. This should not be over-claimed as systematic fieldwork, but it does point toward a real cultural shift. The shrine is increasingly encountered through media memory. This is what may be called cinematic pilgrimage.

A Qawwali singer singing at the Hazrat Nizamuddin Dargah on Eid, 2026. Image courtesy: Yash Mishra.

Sanitised Sufism and the Politics of Visibility

The popularity of Sufi imagery in Hindi cinema should not obscure the fact that it often comes packaged as a safe and inclusive spirituality. Films repeatedly present the Dargah as a place where barriers dissolve, but they often avoid the historical and contemporary realities of Muslim marginality. The shrine becomes an agreeable symbol of harmony, and Islamophobia is either absent or displaced. This is one of the reasons the paper insists on the phrase 'sanitised Sufism'. The term does not mean fake Sufism. It means a cinematic version of Sufism stripped of its difficulty. It is made to appear universal, emotionally soothing, and politically non-threatening. That is why it works so well in mass cinema. But it also means that the shrine's deeper historical and communal significance is often foreshadowed. This tendency is visible not only in shrine scenes but in the way, cinema stages Sufi symbols more broadly. The emotional openness associated with the Dargah is treated as if it were universally available, while the actual social pressures around Islamic spaces remain under explored. In this sense, cinema "performs inclusivity" without always confronting the structures that make inclusion politically meaningful.

Bhansali, and 'maximalist Sufism'

Sanjay Leela Bhansali's cinema sharpens this tension through its visual excess. In HEERAMANDI (2024), "Sakal Bann" is set in a highly ornate world of elite courtesan culture. The song retains devotional associations, but the setting turns it into a spectacle. What was once embedded in ascetic and devotional memory is recoded as luxury performance. A similar process appears in PADMAAVAT (2018), where Khusrau's legacy is absorbed into a stylised world of grandeur and conflict. He is present, but not fully as a historical cultural actor. Rather, he becomes a decorative sign within a narrative driven by spectacle and polarisation. This is not only a matter of historical accuracy, but of function. Bhansali's films do not remove Sufi culture; they aesthetically normalize it so intensely that its ethical and devotional density is overshadowed by visual excess (Safvi, 2016) This is why "maximalist Sufism" is a useful phrase. It names a style in which the sacred is neither denied nor amplified, but rather transformed into luxury, surface, and spectacle. The result is emotionally effective cinema, but it is not equivalent to devotional practice.

Conclusion

Hindi cinema has played a major role in popularising Sufi aesthetics in India. It has carried Khusrau's poetry, Nizamuddin's shrine, and Qawwali-inflected feeling into mass culture. It has also made the Dargah visible to viewers who might otherwise never have encountered it. In that sense, cinema has preserved something important. But it has also transformed what it preserves. It often offers a safe and emotionally appealing Sufism that foregrounds universality, harmony, and spiritual refuge, while muting theological debate, historical specificity, and the political realities of the Muslims. The shrine becomes a cinematic destination, the song becomes a portable emotional code, and the saint becomes a symbol of inclusive feeling. The question, then, is not whether cinema has faithfully represented Sufism or destroyed it. It is; what kind of public memory cinema produces when it translates a shrine tradition into popular spectacle? In the case of the Nizamuddin Dargah, the answer is clear: cinema has created a parallel cultural life for the shrine, where devotion, memory, and consumption intersect. Understanding that life is essential for studying heritage, representation, and the politics of cultural translation in contemporary India.

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Yash Vyas

Yash's practice centers on the construction of miniature architectural forms that emerge from personal memories, spatial experiences, and reflections on the relationship between built environments and human existence.

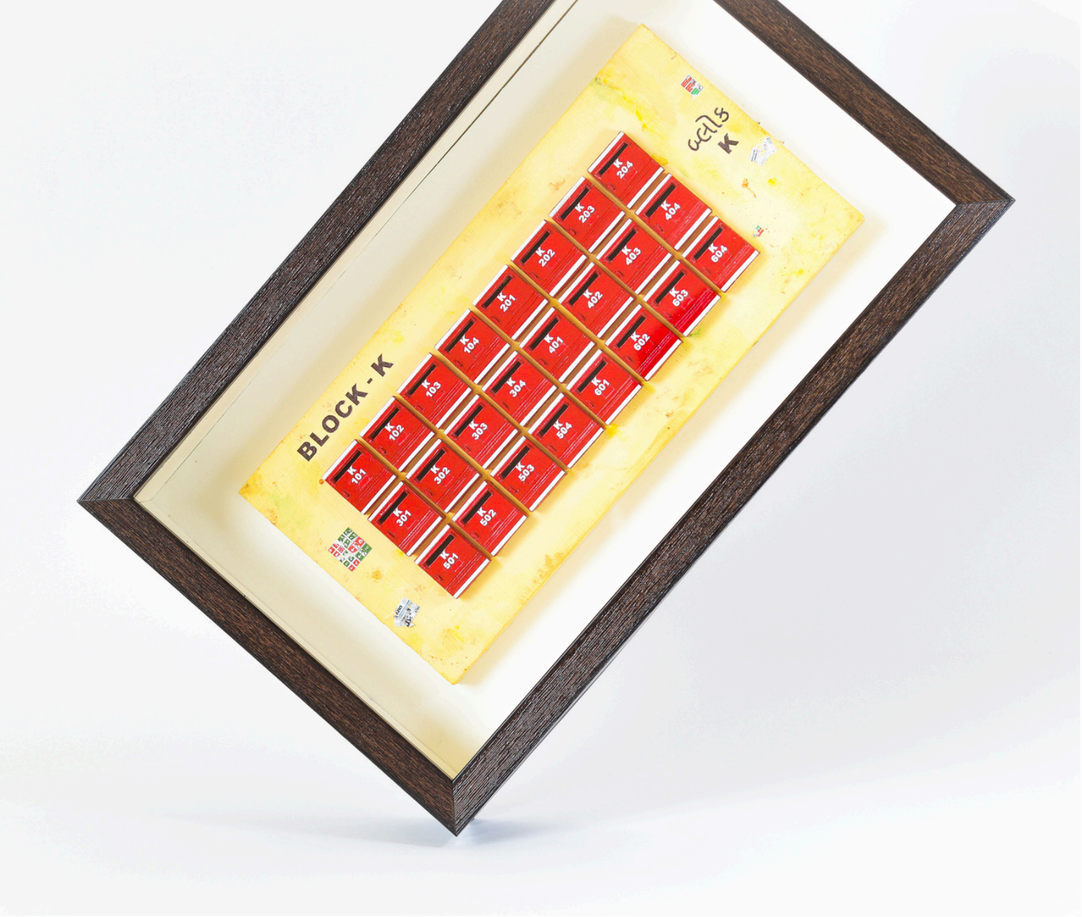
Vyas's work explores the shifting dialogue between architecture, memory, movement, and identity. Through miniature structures and sculptural installations, he investigates how physical spaces shape emotional and psychological experiences of belonging, selfhood, and collective memory. The built environment functions in his practice not merely as subject matter but as a living archive of histories, gestures, and invisible social structures. Central to his inquiry is the human experience of navigating space — moving through thresholds, walls, silences, and transitional environments. By deconstructing and reimagining familiar architectural forms, Vyas challenges notions of permanence and recognition, encouraging viewers to reconsider the subtle ways environments influence perception and identity. His works often balance intimacy with estrangement, creating spaces that feel simultaneously familiar and uncertain. The miniature scale plays a significant role within his practice. Through acts of reduction and condensation, Vyas transforms vast and complex architectural realities into intricate, contemplative forms. These scaled environments invite slow observation, offering viewers a heightened awareness of interconnected details often overlooked within everyday life. The miniature becomes both observational device and emotional landscape — a space where memory, fragility, and imagination coexist.

A significant body of work within his practice is The Lottery Ticket series, which reflects upon artistic labour, rejection, aspiration, and persistence within contemporary systems of visibility and validation. The work consists of miniature post boxes arranged like a silent colony, each empty and waiting. Traditionally associated with communication and anticipation, these post boxes become metaphors for unanswered applications, unrealized opportunities, and deferred futures. Within the series, the "lottery ticket" symbolizes the repetitive cycle of submissions, portfolios, open calls, and applications that artists continuously navigate in pursuit of recognition. Vyas examines the emotional and psychological weight carried by these acts, particularly within an increasingly digital landscape where accessibility coexists with invisibility. The empty post boxes embody absence, longing, and resilience, transforming ordinary objects into vessels of artistic yearning and collective uncertainty.

Through The Lottery Ticket, Vyas reflects on the vulnerability embedded within creative practice and the precarious nature of success in contemporary art systems. Yet the work does not position emptiness as defeat. Instead, these miniature architectural forms become quiet monuments to persistence — spaces that continue to hold hope, endurance, and the possibility that one day the awaited message may finally arrive.

The Lottery Ticket, 2023
Mix media installation.

The Lottery Ticket, 2023
Mix media installation.



The Lottery Ticket, 2023
Mix media installation.

Image courtesy: Documented by Aadarsh Parmar

Zala Siddique

Treacherous Luminaries, 2019
Clay & fibreglass.

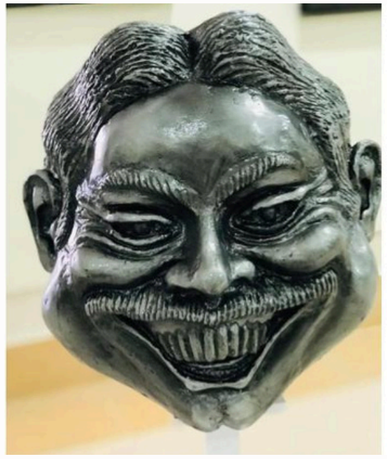
Zala's practice is centered on caricature sculpture, distinguished by meticulous attention to detail and an ability to capture nuanced expressions through satire and exaggeration.

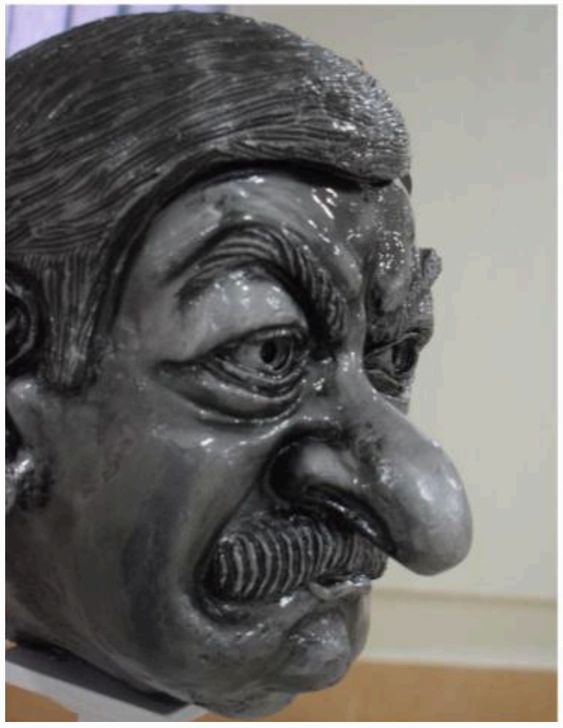
Her work often engages with sociopolitical realities, using humour and distortion as critical tools to examine structures of power, authority, and public perception. Through caricature, Siddique transforms recognizable behavioural traits and expressions into sculptural forms that oscillate between playfulness and critique.

In her installation Treacherous Luminaries, Siddique explores the issue of political nepotism and the concentration of power within privileged circles. The installation features seven caricatured portraits arranged facing inward toward a mirrored table. Through exaggerated features and theatrical expressions, the sculptures ridicule political leadership while simultaneously exposing systems of self-interest and detachment. The mirrored table functions as a central metaphor within the work. Reflecting only the figures themselves, it symbolizes political self-absorption and the inability of those in power to engage with the realities faced by the people they represent. The inward-facing arrangement further reinforces themes of exclusion, insularity, and the cyclical reinforcement of authority within closed political systems.

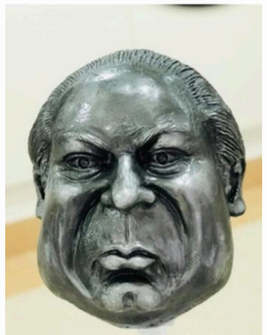
Through satire, symbolism, and sculptural exaggeration, Treacherous Luminaries critiques how positions of governance are often inherited or sustained through influence rather than merit. At the same time, the installation invites viewers to reflect on the broader societal consequences of nepotism, including disconnection, inequality, and the erosion of public trust.

Siddique's practice ultimately uses caricature not only as a form of visual humour but also as a powerful method of social commentary, creating works that encourage critical reflection on political structures and contemporary civic realities.





Treacherous Luminaries, 2019
Clay & fibreglass.



HGC

HIDDEN GEM COLLECTIVE